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Hands Up; or, The Knights of the Canyon.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "DANDY DARKE," "FARO FRANK OF HIGH PINE," ETC., ETC., ETC.



"YOUR LIFE OR HIS!" SHE CONTINUED. "STRIKE YOUR HORSES WITH THE WHIP AND ON!"

HANDS UP;

OR,

The Knights of the Canyon.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER,

AUTHOR OF "PISTOL PARDS," "SOFT HAND, SHARP," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE NATURE OF A PROEM.

"HAS the prisoner anything to say for himself?"

The speaker was Captain Rawlings, a stern-faced man, who occupied the position of Judge Lynch from necessity and not from choice. It might have been unsafe to refuse it.

And they were honest men who composed the jury, and honest men who swarmed around, mad though they were, and thirsting for blood. At least, the majority of the spectators were honest enough, though here and there was one with haggard face and parched lips, who wondered how soon he too would be caught in the rising tide of popular indignation and wrath.

It was a rough camp, away down upon the southern border of Arizona, and such a thing as a rising of the Vigilantes had never been thought of until half an hour before the storm broke. Other men had been killed before the chance shot struck "Bud" Henry, but that was the last straw. Some one then shouted "Hang him!" and the fire of passion was lit and blazing.

Yet it had been no easy matter for them to corral the man who fired that shot. He was lithe as a panther, and twice as savage; and there was a partner of his who stood in with him in this last fatal game, until he had to throw up his hand, with a ball through his lungs.

So, wounded in half a dozen places, panting like a wild beast at bay, his clothing rent and tattered, his hat gone, the prisoner heard the verdict of guilty with a savage sneer on his lips, but with a ghastly pallor on the blood-splotted face that, an hour or two ago, had been so handsome.

He heard the deep voice of the judge, but his mouth remained closed, while his eyes roved around for any possible avenue of escape.

"Varley Vane, prisoner at the bar—"

"Hold on, right there!"

The prisoner turned suddenly and faced Captain Rawlings. He had regained something of his courage, and as he spoke the sneer on his face grew deeper.

"Hold on! There's nothing I can say, I very well know, that can change the verdict of this camp and jury. I fired at Sol Blaine, and missed him. At my time of life to make a blunder like that deserves hanging. I can hit a half-dollar at thirty yards, and if you'll give me my two revolvers I'll get away with any five men in camp. Out of sheer cussedness the bullet hit Bud Henry."

As he spoke that name an angry roar arose that drowned his voice.

"Hang him!"

"Shoot him!"

"Shut off his wind! No more chin music here!"

So the voices potential shouted, but the prisoner went on, perfectly unruffled, though his words were audible only to those in his immediate vicinity:

"I reached Blaine a second later, but that counts for nothing. If you hang me on Henry's account, it's all right; I deserve it. But what I want to say is, that if you are going to string me up for being Varley Vane, you have the wrong man. I simply want to set you straight, because in such an important matter as this, any mistake would be too utterly distressing."

Pity it was that his cool address was lost on the judge, who was distracted by an attempt made to reach the prisoner, on whom sentence had not yet been pronounced. He caught the graceful bow of the prisoner; however, and solemnly turned to address him:

"Prisoner at the bar, upon a fair examination of your case by a jury of twelve respectable citizens of this camp, it has been found that you are a thief and a blackleg, and have been guilty of four murders in as many weeks, without counting those you may have injured or taken off at the time of your arrest; and to the count that you murdered Bud Henry the jury unanimously return a verdict of guilty. The sentence of this Court, therefore, is that you be hanged by the neck at the crossroads, and if there be any mercy for such souls as yours, we may add a prayer that you find it; on this earth, for your body there will be none."

"Thank you, captain. That is all done shipshape and in style. Now finish the job in the same fashion, and you will have the thanks of yours truly."

Very little time did Vigilante justice propose to give to this young man. The trial was over, judgment pronounced, the guilt admitted—next in order was immediate justice.

"Away with him!" shouted the rabble, and

with a hoarse roar they packed in still tighter around the prisoner.

"Thank you, no," he said, lightly. "You needn't carry me. My limbs are in a good state of preservation, and you needn't fear that they will not do their duty. And don't hesitate on my account. It's a very ugly job, and the sooner it's over the better."

No need of his taunting tones to madden the crowd; they were all ripe for judicial slaughter, and by this time the worst men were howling the loudest. Their hour of peril seemed to be past, and something had come that was well fitted to their natures. Struggling, pushing, snarling, they followed the one man bound, and the place of expiation was soon reached.

The ways of justice were primitive in that camp; but they were sure. In twenty minutes the work was finished, and sated and solemn the crowd turned away, ready to disperse, and yet with something of the air of an army willing but not anxious to meet a new foe.

And then up into the crisp evening air there rose the ringing sound of flying footsteps.

Along the road there came a horse and rider, and scarcely were they heard and seen when they were in the midst of the crowd.

"Merciful heavens! Am I too late?"

It was a woman who spoke, a girl-woman of rare, dark beauty, dressed in black velvet with a single bow of red ribbon at her shoulder, and at her throat a great, blazing diamond, while from her broad sombrero there trailed a long feather, which floated down behind her back.

At a touch from her finger her steed halted, and then it was, as her piercing black eyes caught sight of the hanging motionless figure, that she threw up her hands and uttered her wailing cry.

"Ye'r too late fur ther fun; but jist in time fur ther funeral," shouted a coarse voice; but the speaker shrunk back into the crowd as the blazing eyes of the girl were turned suddenly toward him. Her despair was only momentary; now into her face came a revengeful glow.

"And you have hung him; hung him without even giving him time for a last word from me, his wife. Villains! Brutes! Fiends! Is this your boasted justice? Ah, growl if you like; I can show my teeth too! You have had your justice; now, by heavens, I will have my revenge. Who was judge of this mockery of a court?"

Her words poured out in a torrent. She was reckless, wild. At her question the somber-faced Rawlings touched his hat, at the same time raising his other hand as if to still the threatened Babel of reply.

"I was that unfortunate individual. It was a stern duty, and I assure you that the trial was conducted with perfect fairness."

He spoke no further.

Like lightning the girl whipped out the revolver from the belt that girdled her trim waist, and dropping it into line with the judge's face, she pulled the self-cocking trigger.

There was a sharp report; but though the aim was deadly no bullet was Rawlings fated to receive. At the instant the weapon was leveled, some one in the crowd threw up his own revolver and fired, apparently without aim.

But aim there was, for the bullet struck the barrel of the pistol in the hand of the raging woman, and fairly tore the weapon from her grasp. Then a powerful looking man sprang to her side:

"You fool, you!" he exclaimed, in a low tone.

"What can you do against a hundred? They have tasted blood and would tear you limb from limb. Go! Get yourself out of sight before they pull you down. When they scatter once, and you can meet them one at a time, go on with your revenge!"

He turned her horse's head as he spoke, and as he dropped the bridle struck it a sharp blow. The animal dashed away and the woman did not attempt to stop it, but turning in her saddle she took one last look at the dangling form, and then shook her clinched fist, in mad defiance, at the crowd.

"I reckon this camp ain't fighting women," said the large man, in a steady voice. "It ain't that low down yet; but if it is you'll have to tackle Judge Rawlings, an' me, an' a few more, that's white."

It was dangerous, just then, but the attempt succeeded. The crowd grew calmer and dispersed; three or four cut down the lifeless corpse and carried it away for burial, and when, at midnight, the girl returned there was no trace or sign of the executed man. She went away disconsolate.

And it was not until nearly a year had elapsed that all this was described in a New York paper.

CHAPTER II.

A GIRL WITH A SECRET.

"GRACIOUS heavens!"

A young woman, scarcely twenty-one, richly dressed, with a beautiful face and a slight though perfect form, suddenly threw up her hands, her face turning an ashen white as she dropped the paper at which, for the last few moments she had been glancing.

"Can it be?"

She staggered back into a chair and bowed her face upon her slender white hands, unmindful of her companion, a well dressed but plain-featured lady of thirty-five or forty, who moved quickly forward to her side.

"What is it, Mira? What have you seen?"

"Nothing, nothing!" answered the girl, pressing her hands together in an effort to regain her composure, and speaking with an effort as her breath came short and with evident pain.

"Are you ill? Is any one dead?"

Mrs. Ward was uncertain; yet her eyes rested on the paper, which had fluttered to the floor. She was inclined to think that the solution of the mystery was there.

"No, no! I have seen nothing. No one is dead. It was a sudden, strange feeling. It must be my nerves; I need a change; I am tired of this everlasting sameness. I will not be caged here forever."

The elder lady looked at her with gathering suspicion. What was it the young girl was trying to hide? She had some curiosity, in spite of her somewhat stolid face, and when Mira waved her aside, in a furtive way she picked up the paper, and glanced at the page on which the young girl's eyes had rested.

If she could only have guessed what subject would interest the fair young heiress, she might have been able to find the solution of the riddle, but on the broad page there was a wonderful jumble of subjects—foreign news, home news, local items and telegraph romances. What could it have been?

"The Honorable Roger Vanclyde, chairman of the committee, is well known as an advanced reformer and a sturdy advocate of—"

Those lines seemed a possible key to the situation, since Roger Vanclyde was the uncle of this young lady who was sitting with her face buried in her hands, and it was in his house that the two resided. Of that, more anon. She would have read further, though she could not guess why such a thing as the appointment of her uncle upon a perambulating committee of investigation should shake the nerves of an ordinarily self-contained young lady of society, but just then there came an interruption in the shape of a caller, who only lingered a moment on the outer threshold, for as a friend of the proprietor, and an intimate acquaintance of the inmates, he was not usually treated with much ceremony.

General Harvey Sloat was not an old resident of the city, but was a "new" man from the West, who had come on, the preceding summer, on business connected with his mining interests. As a possible bonanza king, who had a dark, handsome face and perfect manners, he had entered good society on a fair footing. As a politician also was he known, and this winter he had made several pilgrimages to Washington, where, in the few days that he remained, he was actively engaged in button-holing other politicians, who had climbed a round or two higher up the ladder than himself.

But his stay at the capital was, at every visit, brief, and it was likely that he only went to confer with other influences which he had at work. The society in New York in which he mingled scarcely suspected at what he was aiming, since it was a secret even to Roger Vanclyde.

Roger Vanclyde, though a successful politician, was also something of a philanthropist and had hopes that, if he had not already found it, he would some day discover the long-sought but never-discovered universal panacea for the ills which poverty and toil have, from time immemorial, been compelled to bear.

He was a highly respectable gentleman of middle age and spectacles, and it was rather a mystery how he ever succeeded in getting into Congress; but in Congress he was; and being a man of figures and theories, and very little acquaintance with the realities of life, he managed to make a fair position for himself, while his crotchets were listened to with pity rather than sympathy.

Perhaps on this account, or for the sake of the eternal unfitting of things—or perhaps through the efforts of General Sloat, he was appointed chairman of an investigating committee, that was to proceed to the Pacific coast with rather a roving commission, the exact nature of which has never fully transpired. There have been other committees of the same sort, that have traveled over much the same ground, but it is not likely that any of them started out with so enthusiastic a chairman, or one more unfitted to deal with the stern realities of the Western slope.

Roger Vanclyde had a niece, Mira Coyle by name, who was very unlike her uncle, and who, during the three years she had been under his guardianship, had established a mild sort of despotism in his bachelor household, all the more positive because, by the death of her father when she was a little over seventeen, she had been emancipated from an iron rule, that had scarcely allowed her to call her soul her own. From never having her way in anything she came to have her way in all things. A beautiful girl she was; and when you add that she was heiress, or would be in a short time, to a large fortune, it is not hard to understand

that she had a good social position, and was a source of great anxiety to her uncle, in those moments which he gave to revolving the serious problems of her existence.

She had met General Sloat on more occasions than she could have enumerated. He seemed to be a friend of her uncle's, and he had the *entree* of their house. He was not an old man at all, but being her senior by a dozen years he seemed so to her, and she had accepted his attentions in a matter-of-course way that was not very flattering, and yet, supposing him to be a great deal more in earnest than Mira suspected, was not absolutely discouraging.

One class of troubles the Honorable Vanclyde had heretofore escaped. While Miss Mira was fond of society in general, and was a bit of a flirt, and all that, she never showed a decided penchant for any particular individual, and he had hoped that her sterling good sense would keep her clear of all annoying entanglements. Mrs. Ward was not a watch-dog at all; her duty was to play propriety and act as a companion when needed or wanted, though all the same she would have been an inmate of the house, since she had nowhere else to go, and had next to nothing of her own. Her husband had made "an awful smash," and then died suddenly, leaving her crushed.

With all this for explanation, the reader can probably understand better the situation of affairs, and especially why, this gloomy evening, when the rain was slowly but steadily beating down in the street, and the very interiors of the houses were dismal, General Sloat ventured out to make an unexpected call.

He came forward with a smiling face, however.

"I know you will pardon me for intruding such a night as this, but having received letters and telegrams from Washington this evening, I thought I might be able to give you particulars of matters of which you have already probably received an inkling."

He ceased speaking and looked up.

Then for the first time he had a fair view of the young lady's face.

By a wonderful effort she had recovered her self-possession; but she could not, in the brief period of time allotted, smooth away the traces of her late agitation so thoroughly that the keen black eyes of General Sloat could not note them. He gave a quick glance from her to Mrs. Ward, and then his eyes rested upon the paper, which had been hastily flung aside on his entrance. Then his eyebrows raised, with an almost imperceptible motion.

"I suppose my news has been anticipated, as the evening papers contain it in part."

"You refer to the appointment of Mr. Vanclyde on the committee?"

"Yes. It was, no doubt, a surprise to him; but there is no man in whose hands the work would be safer. I have had my suspicions for some time that the chairmanship would fall to his lot, and have sent him a telegram of congratulation. What, though, is to become of you meantime? Of course you will remain here for a while; but I suppose you will arrange your programme for the summer at once, so as to submit it to your uncle before he leaves?"

"My programme is already arranged," responded Mira, with a forced laugh. "I shall attach myself to the committee, and make a personal inspection of a region in which I have long had a great interest."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the general, with a start.

"Oh, Mira, impossible!" chorused Mrs. Ward. She seldom spoke more than two words at a time; but now her surprise made her utter three.

"Not only positively possible, but absolutely certain. The edict has gone forth. I shall commence saying good-by to-morrow, and will start in a week."

Then the general, after giving her the information received from his private sources, attempted to combat her determination, but met with poor success.

"I understand that he starts almost at once, with two other members of the committee. It was only this evening that I was complaining that this humdrum life was killing me. The chance seems providential. I can see safely something of the West, its men and manners, and draw in health, hope and inspiration. I may, in fact, find a mission, the one thing a woman, at least once in her life, yearns for."

"And which they as invariably find, since it always lies in one direction and that a very plain one. You can guess what that is?"

The general cast an undisguised look of admiration at the handsome face before him, a look that brought the color back to Mira's face, for she saw in it something that she had not noted before, and realized that at that moment the general was dangerously near to a proposal.

But if, by chance, the general had any settled purpose, he was also shrewd enough, in that glance to take in the fact that the time had not come to press it further, and after the momentary pause he went on:

"You think differently. Well, wait a little. You may draw health and profit from the trip; and as I am utterly selfish I proffer my aid in

case your uncle should incline to turn a deaf ear to your proposal. I intended to tell you, before leaving, that my own affairs call me back to the slope, and by using a little extra diligence I will be able to travel thither in your company. I know the ground well, and think I can give Mr. Vanclyde some assistance if he will avail himself of my knowledge. I suppose I may dare to hope that my presence will not prove altogether distasteful?"

"The more the merrier!" answered Mira, her mood suddenly seeming to change; but something told her in her heart that General Sloat had come to the most sudden resolution of his life, and that beneath all his varnish of look and manner there was something false, and, perhaps, to be feared.

CHAPTER III.

AN ARTIST AND HIS TOOL.

THAT very same evening, though a couple of hours later, two men were talking in a low tone in one of the small rooms of a second rate hotel, "down-town."

The one was pretty thoroughly hidden in the folds of a light ulster, and the broad rim of his hat was drawn down so as to shade his face, yet the fierce black eyes that peered out and met the glances of his comrade were certainly those of General Sloat.

The other was a tall, broad-shouldered man, not disreputable in his appearance, and yet with something in his make-up and countenance that stamped him as a bold, bad man, who had more than once staked much on desperate chances, and was willing to do it again. His long brown hair was pushed backward from his face, and fell upon his shoulders, while his dress, that was really for service and not for show, smacked so strongly of western mountains and plains that it would have attracted attention on the street.

On the table, in front of General Sloat, lay a copy of the same newspaper that, a short time before, had dropped from the hands of Mira Coyle.

"It is the luckiest thing in the world for both of us that I met you. You are cleaned out, and I need you now. I would have given you a stake, anyway, for you are the sort of man it pays to set up; but I can do better. I can put you right to work in a placer that will pan out well and no risk, except lead and steel, with a chance to hit back."

"Now I hear you. Count me in, though I don't know much about things back here. I don't savvy the signs, and can't more than half guess how far it is to bed rock. If it's only nerve you want, count me in, for that's about all I've got to travel on. Maybe I can show 'em a touch or two anyhow, if I am a greenhorn from the West. There's one thing; I can sling pasteboards or use fists and irons with the best of 'em."

"Don't worry about that. I could pick up a dozen men who would do any job I want, in New York, better than you, at half the money. I don't want you here; I'm going to send you back West as fast as steam will carry you."

"Hallelujah! That's my name prezactly; and if you ever catch me this side of the plains plug me for an angel. But all that's going to take rocks."

"The one question is, whether you can venture back. If you dare I will furnish all the funds needed, never fear."

"I won't deny, general, but what there's some places I'd sooner skip through by moonlight; but by this time, I reckon, all the old Vigilantes are pretty much hung themselves, so I needn't worry about them. For one or two men I don't care a continental, and if you heel me right, and put a few slugs in my pocket, I'll walk through from Chiriqui to Shasta and save every loon that tries to stop me. Now, what's the dodge?"

"This," answered the general, tapping gently the paper which lay on the table before him, and speaking in a low tone:

"Is this man dead? I will give five thousand dollars to know that he is, and to obtain the papers which I believe he has or had, and to which I swear I have, or ought to have, a perfect right."

"That's a good price," said the man addressed, folding his arms over his breast, and looking coolly into the dancing eyes of his *vis-a-vis*. "I haven't looked at the paper yet, but I can swear that he's an ugly man to handle. Some judge, is it, that has put his finger in your mines, and won't let go for a reasonable price? Would you sit down on a big hornet's nest—and stay there, for five thousand?"

"You are mistaken. If I offer you that for proof, the State would give you that much for doing the job. The man is a road-agent, with the lives of a cat. Read it and you can see for yourself."

He pushed the paper over to his companion, who took it up and let his eyes run hastily over a quarter of a column of fine print headed, "Lynch Law in Arizona!"

Then he pursed up his lips and uttered a low, long whistle.

"Why, general, I know that man, and I know that country. Bet you a dollar I could

put my finger right on him. That is, I could find him; but to take him into camp would be a different thing. Bet you another dollar he's not gone under, and not going under. Eh?"

"I suspected all that, and that was what brought me here to-night. Tell me your real opinion, and then I will explain my object."

"Not much to explain. They hung the wrong man. Vane wouldn't beg if they roasted him on coals of fire. And he's a high and mighty young man, that holds his head 'way up if he is a road agent and has been a card-sharp, and all that. I reckon he's some young man from the East that come of good stock, but got let down when he hadn't friends to boost him along, and went to the bad a-humming. Why, see here now, I saved his life once, though I can't say I ever liked him too much. It would be a joke, me a hunting him up."

"But will you do it?"

"For rocks, yes. When do I start?"

"At once—to-morrow. There is no time to lose. At least I cannot give you more than a day or so here, though it will probably take that time to get you ready."

"And that is the whole job, is it?"

The man spoke as though to himself: but Sloat answered quickly, and as if he had but just arrived at a decision:

"For that part you will have your expenses paid in any event, and I will guarantee you the five thousand if you are successful. There is something else that I had thought of letting to another man, or men, but it will go to you if you think you can handle it. Confound it, Walsh, I don't suppose you are overly squeamish, and I'll let you know something of my game. There's a little woman, worth a good many hundred thousands, who may be traveling in that section, in company with your very humble servant. I'm not sure whether she will be open to reason, and if she is not, it may be necessary to use a little judicious restraint. I know no one I would trust as soon as I would you. If you get the other out of the way in time, there will be money in helping me to attend to this."

"Money! That's my name, every time. Lay out your game and you'll see me stacking up the chips heavy."

"You will want some partners in the matter—men who won't be afraid of a little risk and can scatter out after the work is done, and forget all about it. In fact, I want you to get a little gang together who can play road agents, but that you can trust. I'll foot the bills and divide five thousand more between you."

"See here, pard, you must be made of money. It's not so many years since they were talking about a hemp necktie for a man of your inches, down on the Feather River."

"Of my inches, but not of my name," answered Sloat, with his eyes gleaming a little more brightly than usual. "And it was on suspicion of slaughtering one Herbert Vince. Don't you forget that. In those days I did my own work, but I've got more irons in the fire now than I can handle, and when I move about there's a thousand eyes on me, and men say, 'There goes the White Jacket boss,' or 'the man from Black Jack,' and all that. I want to arrange everything before the work begins, and you're a man I can trust and tie to."

"And well you may! We've been there together. But I'm not taking any sealed proposals. I want the thing down fine. I want to break right up to the section lines, and then I'll gather my pay if you don't reap your crop. See?"

"Yes, I see; and I'll fix things to satisfy you. To-morrow I will arrange it so you can see the little divinity. I swear to you, Walsh, that I've set my heart on two things, and I'll not fail in either, if it takes a dozen lives and twenty thousand dollars. I never draw out till one side or the other is broke—and I always win."

"And if I should happen to go back on you in these little matters?"

The man asked the question in a cool, matter-of-fact way.

"Then some other man will kill you. There wouldn't be many tears shed or questions asked if Gid Walsh should turn up missing."

"I believe you, my boy. And now let's make a few notes of the campaign. All this work can't be done in Frisco, and you'll have to arrange things for one of my old stamping-grounds, where I know the ropes."

So in a still lower tone General Sloat began his directions and unfolded his plans.

CHAPTER IV.

"A SINNER BY JERKS AND A BAD MAN FROM BODIE"—ON THE WING.

WHEN Mira first broached her intention of attaching herself to the committee and visiting the far West, there was only one person who seriously believed that she could or would carry out her intentions.

That person was General Sloat.

It was very strange, but he knew this girl better than any of them—better than Roger Vanclyde or Mrs. Ward, under whose very eyes she had grown up. He knew that she would be ready, if she had to go in a street costume and walk a fair share of the way, and he made his

preparations accordingly, though the change in his plans involved more of complication and labor.

A week he would have, but he intended to send his ally, whose presence in New York wickedly seemed almost providential, a great deal sooner if it could be managed.

The afternoon after Mira had announced her determination there came a ring at the bell, and a tall, broad-shouldered man, with shaggy whiskers, flowing locks and a wide-brimmed sombrero stood at the doorway, inquiring for Mr. Vanclyde.

On being told that he was in Washington yet, and was not expected home for some days, he begged for an interview with the congressman's niece, Miss Mira, and after some little delay he was ushered into her presence.

"Good P. M., miss," said this man, waving his hat with an air of natural grace. "I'm Burt Harker, late from Chiriqui, that's drifted East on a wild-goose chase, an' are shoal on the bar, an' lookin' fur ther honest galoot ez 'ill histe me out er grub-stake. I knows ther western regions from Denver to ther Horn, an' from Heeler rivyer to ther Saskatchewan ez though they war a book an' I war ther boss reader ov ther 'way up Sunday-school. An' I heered that yer uncle would be wantin' sich a man. Ef so, put it right thar, pard—ov guides, scouts, cowboys an' keerd-flippers I'm ther boss. I'll steer him through a hull corral ov growlin' grizzlies, er a perarie full ov 'Pache bucks, 'thout the loss ov a ha'r."

"I don't think," began Mira, "that I exactly understand you."

"All right, miss; bunch ther keerds, an' deal 'em ag'in. Which I would remark are, thet tenderhufts from the East hez er slim chance with ther catawampious cattermounts ez yowl through ther galorious limits ov Kaliforny, an' ef yer uncle goes thar alone they'll scoop him. What he wants is er man with sand ter see him through. An' that man's me. No gouge games kin they play 'on him when Burt Harker's round! Waugh! I'm er sinner by jerks, an' a bad man from Bodie. Ef yer speaks a good word to ther old man it's like ez not he'd take me on fur ther round up. Savvy? Thet's why I wanted ter chip in my chin music, afore some other galoot got ahead on me."

"I am very sorry for your sake that such an opening does not exist; but I am inclined to think you overrate the danger, of which I think so lightly that I intend to accompany my uncle myself."

"Minks an' mushrats!"

The man looked at her as though lost in astonishment at her temerity.

"I hardly know yet where we will drift to; but if it should seem necessary I have no doubt but that we can obtain a competent guide on the spot, without taking an utter stranger three or four thousand miles to perhaps find him worthless at last. And if needed we can procure a military escort, since we go in the capacity of servants of the Government."

The man broke out into a coarse laugh.

"Ha, ha! Er guard ov dough boys. Good-day, miss. Yer er lady to talk squar' to er plainsman like meself, but yer make me smile. All right, I won't waste ther time; but ef yer gits out thar you'll likely find me 'round an' willin' ter do a squar' turn fur love—ef ther's no chance fur money. Recomember, Burt Harker's me name, an' I'm ther boss to tie to."

The man with the wide hat bowed himself out, leaving Mira uncertain what to make of him and questioning herself whether she should have endured his presence for the sake of a supposed glimpse of the sort of men she might soon meet.

As for the boss scout, he might be all that he said, yet he was a fraud of the first water, since his flowing beard and his obtrusive manner were gone when, not long after, he met General Sloat.

He was in a good-humor, though, for he laughed heartily as he slapped the little black-eyed man on the back.

"I've been 'round there, taking a view of things, and she's a little brick, smooth-pressed, Milwaukee, and all that."

The general uttered a quotation that was not from a psalm.

"Don't be scared. I was rigged up so you wouldn't have known me yourself, and if ever the little girl asks after Burt Harker you just give him a bully character—rough and reliable, and all that. I dropped in to see if I couldn't get a job as a guide. You understand, I wanted to be sure which was the right woman."

"And she talked to you, did she? Suppose she had said yes?"

"She didn't or you might have been short a pard. I want you to tell me what she says next time she sees you. I wouldn't be surprised if she'd weaken, on the sample of the sort out there."

But Mira did not weaken, and by the time her uncle had his own preparations made she was all ready. Before the novelty of the idea had worn off she was on the way, and not a soul, unless it was General Sloat, suspected that she had a purpose.

But a certain quarter of a column of closely-

printed matter was hidden away in her little purse, and she had a vague hope that her journey would not be thrown away.

After all it was no great wonder that she should have set her heart on the trip; and so Roger Vanclyde thought after a month had been spent in California. She was very little trouble to him, and very often a positive help. When the young man who had accompanied the party as their private secretary was taken ill she occupied his position very well until a substitute was found in the person of Ward Farrar.

Although General Sloat had made the journey from New York with them he had disappeared shortly after their arrival, going to look after his mining interests, though promising to rejoin them on their tour through southern California and Arizona. He had interests there, also.

It was some days after his departure that Mira, who had made a number of acquaintances and received a good deal of attention, was walking down Montgomery street when she saw a young man come out of a side street just in front of her, who, hastily crossing, disappeared as unceremoniously as he had come.

Mira gave a cry, and at the cry Ward Farrar, with whom she was walking, gave a start. Then the two halted and looked at each other.

"What is it?" said Farrar, with an anxious face.

"That man."

She made a slight motion with her head to indicate the direction in which he had gone.

"Well?"

"Do you know him? Merciful heavens! I cannot imagine a face so like yet not the same!"

Mira's face was as white as it had been that evening when her eyes had fallen upon the paragraph that had seemed to call her across the continent. It was no wonder if her companion was alarmed.

"How should I know him? I am almost a stranger here, myself. Why, you look as though you had seen a ghost. What can I do? I am at your service."

"Nothing, nothing. Perhaps you are right. A ghost it may have been. Yet, perhaps I may ask you to aid me, if I can trust to your discretion."

The next morning the *Call* had an advertisement requesting H. N. to communicate with an old friend, but the ambiguous wording never met the eyes for which it was intended. The young man who had crossed Montgomery street had left the city, bound southward; and, strangely enough, he too had in his pocket the same paragraph which, at that very hour, Mira Coyle was reading for the twentieth time. Some time was to elapse; but they were destined to meet again.

CHAPTER V.

THE TROUBLE IN CHARCOAL CAMP.

It is a mistake to suppose that in a mining-camp or town, every one is engaged in picking up bowlders of gold and rolling them away in a wheelbarrow; or that even any large percentage of the inhabitants are engaged, on their own account, in the laborious operation of extracting the "glittering dross" from the crystalline matrix that so unwillingly yields its treasures.

Whenever the task requires more than pan and rocker, capital shows its hand, and work for fixed wages begins.

A certain amount of labor is employed on mining proper; and a great deal more on things connected therewith, that pay almost or quite as well, and have a greater element of certainty.

Sometimes it is one thing, sometimes it is another—near Blue Tank there was located a camp of men whose principal occupation appeared to be charcoal-burning.

A rough, solid crowd it was, doing its level best at everything.

At times these men worked hard, and at times they drank and gambled hard, and when they invaded Blue Tank on such a racket, after one or two trials, Blue Tank let them alone.

Yet they had the reputation of being honest, as times go, and only dangerous when invaded in their rights, or maddened by drink.

The foreman of the gang was a gigantic fellow, known as Bill Bucket, though of course no one was certain of that being his right name. He was something over six feet in height, and stoutly built in proportion. He understood his business, and was just the sort of man to rule the rough set under him, for he had courage and strength, and, besides, knew how to handle the weapons that he carried at his belt very well, though he was slow to produce them.

Next in importance was a man in nearly every thing his antipodes.

Hayes was his name—Bantam Hayes they called him. He was a chief in the quartermaster and commissary departments, who kept the accounts, and looked after the supplies! Very little hard work did he ever do, but for all that he was an important man in the camp, and had his influence, though it was hard to tell how he acquired it, for personally he was the reverse of popular.

It was near sundown now in the camp, and had an outsider happened that way he could have seen at a glance that there was some unusual excitement. The charcoal-burners were collected in a throng in front of a large shanty that stood at the edge of a circular opening, a sort of natural clearing, and in their midst was a young man with his hands bound behind his back, his clothing torn, his face scratched, and splashed with blood from a wound on the top of his head.

Silent and grim he stood there, his eyes gleaming, his thin lips parted enough to show his shining white teeth. He looked very much like a wolf in a trap. For all the excited queries and curses that arose around him he had not a word of answer.

Then the burly form of Bill Bucket rose up. He waved one of his immense hands and shouted: "Silence!"

The camp had changed into a court, and a trial was about to commence.

"Whar's the Bantam?" continued Bucket. "This hyar court is goin' to try a case ov murder, an' ez it's likely ther party 'll dance on nothin' shortly after it adjourns, it's goin' to be a court ov reecord, an' Bantam Hayes is to be clerk to take down all the p'int's, which then is to be sworn to. Whar is he? I see'd him on'y a few minutes ago."

At that Bantam Hayes made his appearance, and at a request from the leader brought out a well-thumbed, grimy account book and a pencil. It might have seemed, to an outsider, a burlesque on courts and officials, but to these men it did not, for they were very much in earnest.

"Stand up hyar, pris'ner, closter, an' tell us yer handle an' all about it. What war yer doin' hyar, an' what war yer object?"

The prisoner obeyed in part. With his hands still behind his back he moved forward, a step or two, and gazed straight into the eyes of his questioner, with a keen, wolfish stare, licking his thin, dry lips with the tip of his tongue; but never a word did he speak.

"No use to be sullen 'bout it, boy. We know yer killed Gid Walsh an' skipped; but we want to know what ye did it fur. That's what put us on yer trail, an' made us bring yer back hyar, when we could 'a' strung yer up right whar we found yer. Trees war plenty, an' it would hev saved time."

Bill Bucket's voice actually had a kindly ring. No one could hear him and doubt the honesty of his purpose. It even had its effect on the prisoner, though it did not make him speak.

"Yer name, lad?"

"Vance," snarled the young man, and the next moment he closed his lips tightly.

"What was yer bizness hyar an' why did yer kill Walsh? Explain them p'int's to ther court, an' then we'll open up ther evidence an' see what we kin prove."

Bucket had an original theory about the practice of law, and a very good one it would have been if it had only worked. It seemed more likely than the most skillfully laid trap, to catch the prisoner; but the latter, shutting his eyes, blindly evaded the snare. He did not even shake his head, and remained as voiceless as ever.

"It's no good, boyee. Yer may ez well confess. Afore he died Gid come to and described yer. You'll hev to swing, no git out; but we want to make it ez clear ez we kin ef any outsider kims browsin' 'round to know why we done it."

"See here, you are wasting time!" broke in the young man, suddenly loosening his tongue.

"You trapped me once, and now you want me to say something that you will torture into an admission of guilt upon which you can hang me. I won't say a word. If there is an honest man here, I want him to remember that I haven't said a word, except that my name is Vance, and that I never did anything to be ashamed of it. Now do your worst. I defy you for a gang of murdering fiends."

His voice rose to a shrill scream. If his hands had not been tied he would no doubt have shaken his clinched fist at judge and jury. As it was, he leaned forward, gritting his sharp, white teeth together, and gave his head a defiant toss.

"Bring out ther corpse," said Bucket, in a voice of quiet thunder.

Three or four men hastily entered the shanty, and when they emerged they carried between them on a blanket the stiffened body of the unfortunate Walsh.

He had been killed with a knife, but his death was not instantaneous. As Bucket had said he had come to his senses and strength long enough to give a brief description of the form and face that he had seen bending over him. Then he had expired in awful agony.

"Now bring forrads ther prisoner, onloose a hand, an' let him sw'ar ef he dares, thet he is innercent!"

It was the old, superstitious test, this man proposed; and repugnant enough it would be to any one, whether guilty or innocent.

The subject did not seem to shrink from it. Between two men he stepped forward, their gripe resting tightly on his shoulders, and halted only when by the side of the ghastly ob-

ject that was upheld by the half dozen men who clutched the blanket.

From behind, Bantam Hayes advanced, to loosen the cord upon his wrists.

And that was the very moment which the prisoner chose to act.

At the instant the knotted cords were cut his hands flew forward and then raised.

From the belt of the man on his right he had scratched a knife, and with lightning-like quickness he thrust twice, and then, giving a great spring, bounded clear over blanket and corpse, and alighting between two of the amazed and unprepared holders he dashed away like a deer, breaking through before a single outstretched hand could stay him.

Such a bold move had never been expected; and certainly it gave the best chance of success, slim though even it might be. The bearers of the corpse hesitated to loosen their hold upon it; and they stood in the way of the rest. There was a momentary confusion, when all were afraid to fire, and of that little season the fugitive made the most.

He had looked further than simply breaking loose.

At some little distance there were several horses, saddled and bridled, and tied to neighboring trees.

Straight toward these he dashed, and cutting the halters with a few slashing strokes he stampeded the lot, save one upon which he flung himself. With the flat of his knife-blade he struck his horse sharply and the animal responded by bounding away at full speed.

"Crack!"

From among the trees there came the sound of a shot, and Vance bent low in his saddle, while his horse still sped on.

Then there was a second report, still from the shadows a hundred yards or more from the gazing throng of charcoal men; and this time the horse gave a mighty bound, that would have unseated most riders.

"Hurrah! He's hit! After him, boyees!" shouted Bill Bucket, and one and all took up the trail.

But the horse did not drop. Dashing on at terrific speed, and disappearing in the direction of Blue Tank, they could only hear his distant footfalls ringing on the evening air.

CHAPTER VI.

EN ROUTE FOR BLUE TANK—COLONEL JEHU JOHNSON RAISES HIS VOICE.

If San Mateo had not been hard to move it would have been up and in arms over its distinguished visitors, that had suddenly dropped down there by special coach, making a temporary halt at the Monarch Hotel before going on to Blue Tank, which was their present destination.

The party, in fact, consisted of the Congressional committee, minus one of their number, who had been left behind sick, plus Jack O'Brady, driver of the special, Bart Brandon, outrider, courier, scout and guide, and General Sloat, who had joined them at Yuma.

Of course, Mira Coyle, Mrs. Ward, and young Farrar were included.

A great deal of ground had the committee gone over, a vast amount of statistics had they collected, and very glad were they that there seemed to be a reasonably near ending to their labors.

And Mira began to be hopelessly tired of their journey, which so far had been utterly fruitless for her, except that it had drawn herself and Ward Farrar toward each other, and given her a chance to feel more than ever antagonistic to General Sloat.

The general, however, had made himself very useful to Mr. Vanclyde. He knew the ground over which they were going thoroughly, and was a sharp, shrewd man, who took in the high and depth of a subject almost by instinct. He could cross-examine and turn inside out those whom the committee chose to examine, with cool thoroughness, and Mira heard his praises duly chanted by her uncle.

She listened to them, of course; but to herself she vowed that he was a snake, and would sooner or later show himself such. She did not care if he was rich as Croesus; she would keep him at arm's length.

Ward Farrar had been shrewd enough to divine the state of her feelings, and managed to help her more than once out of an impending *tete-a-tete*; and this, joined to the semi-confidences of San Francisco made her treat him with a kindness which, by contrast, seemed conspicuous.

General Sloat was not the mildest-tempered man in the world, and before long Miss Mira suspected that he had fathomed her feelings pretty thoroughly, though he kept his thoughts to himself, continued his attentions to Mira as far as possible, and now and then cast a black look at the young man, whom so far he had probably seen no practical way of getting rid of.

It was at San Mateo, however, that Roger Vanclyde so far left the world of statistics as to take into consideration the fact that his niece, young, handsome, and destined at no very distant day to have an extensive fortune in her own right, was being thrown almost too much

into the society of a young man of whom he knew very little.

He had been trying to make the Hon. Beniah Holden understand an array of statistics in regard to the Heathen Chinese, and as far as he could see had succeeded in reducing that plastic individual to his own way of thinking, which he more than half-suspected was diametrically opposite to that of General Sloat. He was very much in earnest on the subject of mines and labor, and believed that every one else ought to feel the same interest, though he was well aware that there were differences of belief. He was afraid that General Sloat would prove an obstacle, and for that reason was the more anxious to convince the other member of the committee before Sloat had advanced his opinions.

For half an hour he had been sitting talking on the piazza in front of the Monarch, pouring figures and fancies into the unfathomable depths of Mr. Holden's understanding, and then, finding himself at a loss for certain statistics, he temporarily withdrew in search of his figures, which occupied a small hand-trunk by themselves.

By so doing he came upon Mira and the young secretary, very comfortably ensconced in a window-frame, talking over their Eastern experiences.

He adjusted his spectacles and exclaimed:

"Bless my soul!"

The young people did not hear him; and if they had done so they would scarcely have comprehended his meaning. For the first time Vanclyde had recognized what a handsome young fellow the secretary was.

"Bless my soul!" he continued to himself. "I declare I had forgotten that the girl was a natural born flirt. If she wanted any practice in that line, why in the name of all that is wonderful didn't she take the general? He is more than half willing."

"I am sure, Mr. Farrar," Mira was saying, "that I have met you somewhere some time in the past. Just where, I have tried to think a dozen times, and it has made me angry with myself that I have been unable to solve the mystery. Cannot you help me?"

"I am afraid not," answered Farrar, with a smile. "It is possible, but it must have been very casually, or it certainly would not be such an enigma. I would not forget; of that you may be sure."

"And are you certain that you have not forgotten?"

It was a shrewd question, and Mira intended to watch his face sharply, for she was certain that it would give some indication, if his words did not. Perhaps for Farrar it was as well she was doomed to disappointment.

Just then her uncle's voice broke in.

"Farrar, can you put your hand on tabulated form 21, 2? I want to go over those figures again with Holden. I don't think he quite understands the direct influence on the value of gold abroad the Chinese system here will in a few years exert."

"I think so, sir," answered Farrar, with a nod to Mira that might mean anything. "I can have it for you in a minute; but there should be other copies made for ordinary reference, if you are going to use those tables much. A little extra folding and unfolding will soon wear the figures out. If we stop any time at Blue Tank I shall attend to it."

Farrar began sorting over a mass of papers in search of the required document, while Mr. Vanclyde went on in response to the question.

"We will probably be there longer than I desire, or had, at first, expected. It is not by any means an important point; but General Sloat has some business interests there, and he will possibly claim a little of our time, unless we choose to desert him, which I would hardly think of doing. There are, I hear, some interesting archaeological points in the neighborhood, and probably we can spend some little time on them with profit, though I must say I am anxious to get out of this region—where, Mira, I should never have allowed you to come. You can have no comfort or pleasure here, and I am afraid that you are in more danger than you are aware of."

"Danger! Humbug! That is what Mr. Farrar has been preaching up—what you all tried to warn me of when I first made up my mind to start on the trip. So far I am sure we have seen nothing to bear out the terrible warnings I received. Why, your wicked men act like Admirable Crichtons, and your roughs roar me as gently as sucking doves. There's more blood spilt in New York in one day, more crimes committed, more robbery, fraud and sinfulness, than I could find on the Pacific slope in a year. Is it not so, Mr. Farrar?"

Farrar looked up, a pencil between his teeth, a roll of paper in one hand and an inkstand in the other. He had suddenly dived into the first work he came across, after having found the required document. Something about the face of the chairman of the committee did not altogether suit him.

"I suppose so," he tried to mumble; but his words were swamped in the sounds of an excited voice that came through the front window. The time for the regular coach to Blue

Tank to start had come, and some one was talking at large:

"Death and destruction! You hear me shout?" exclaimed the voice outside.

"Haven't I paid for a first-class inside seat clear through, and now where's there even an empty nail to hang to? Ain't my money as good as any other man's, say? I'm here, with my ante up, waiting for a sight—I, Colonel Jehu Johnson, late of the Foreign Contingent—I'm booked through to Blue Tank by this here hearse, and to Blue Tank I'm going at the risk of bullets!"

Mira, at the sound without, peered through the window at the speaker, who had suddenly cut short the flow of his eloquence and was vigorously mopping his face with a yellow bandana handkerchief which he had pulled from the top of one of the long boot-legs that reached nearly to his waist.

He was a tall man, of Herculean build, and had rather a handsome face, that was full of a good-humored expression that was strangely at variance with his words.

As to costume, he was very simply dressed. His boots were simply immense, what seemed a little strip of corduroy pantaloons being visible above their tops. A coarse red flannel shirt covered his broad chest, and on his head was a wide-brimmed hat that even a "tenderfoot" just in from the stalls could not mistake for anything but a sombrero of Mexican manufacture.

Around his waist was strapped a broad belt, which bristled with weapons. On the butts of his revolvers he placed his hands now, and scowled fiercely at stage, driver and passengers.

There did seem to be some cause for his anxious anger, for when he came running out of the station at San Mateo he found that every seat was already occupied, and a regular swarm was packed on top of the coach.

He turned out his words in a steady stream, never once rising or falling. When he had finished mopping his face he wheeled suddenly and strode rapidly across the long porch of the station, from one end to the other, and back again twice. Then he raised his clinched fist and opened his mouth, as if about to speak, but seemed suddenly to be stricken dumb, since no sound followed.

A luckless boy that was loitering around to see the stage start laughed.

At that the hand of the passenger who seemed in such a fair way to be left shot out and caught the youngster by the waist. He was a good chunk of a boy, but the colonel, without any apparent exertion, raised him up at arm's length and held him there, opening his mouth once more, and this time so widely that it seemed as though the lad had suddenly had a chance to look over the wall of a graveyard, where the rows of tombstones were glistening white and regular.

"Yah!" exclaimed the colonel, and the tombstones tumbled together with an angry clash. "Give me a nian, somebody, and I'll eat him, but I don't want to begin with a boy. Go 'way, sonny!"

He dropped the lad suddenly and whipped out his revolvers.

"Hold on there, I say! I'll make a vacancy on that box and drive over myself if this hearse tries to start afore I get my place up with the mourners!"

The weapons clicked responsive to the motion of his thumbs as he pulled back the hammers and dropped them in very business-like style straight in a line with Charley Hutter's head.

Between roughs, toughs and road-agents Hutter had been running a very gantlet of fire-arms for some years, so that he was by no means decomposed now. He had climbed into his seat and was leisurely holding on to the lines. He did not move a muscle.

"There's jist about one minute to fix things, kurnul. Then time's up. Bustle 'round an' crowd in ef ye'r goin' to."

"Crowd in? Thunder! There ain't room for the sole of my boot. It's all a condemned conspiracy. They knew I was coming, and got up this game to freeze me out. But I tell you I don't freeze worth a cent. Oh, I'm a bad man when I get riled. Spell it out—B-A-D—in great big letters."

Then the colonel lifted up his hands above his shoulders and shook them, revolvers and all, winding up by turning once more and recommending his hasty promenade, thrusting his pistols back in his belt.

"Drive on," he said, wildly swinging his hand. "But just you move that hearse a foot, and I'll pile it so full of lead those hosses will think they're hitched to one corner of the 'Frisco mint."

He paused in his rapid walk and threw his head back suddenly. Right in front of him stood a slenderly built man, whose eyes seemed to pierce straight down into the depths of the colonel's heart.

He held one slender, shapely finger pointed at him, and it appeared to be as good as a revolver.

"Now, colonel," said this stranger, airily, "no nonsense. We've had enough of that. Get in."

CHAPTER VII.

THE KNIGHTS OF THE CANYONS.

THE colonel didn't shoot, or cut, or stab, or even make a display of his muscle, at this abrupt address; but he looked curiously at the individual who had the temerity to brave him in the tide of his passion.

"I've made a place for you," said the sharp-eyed man, "and you get in. We don't want any row around here."

Was he a mesmerizer, or was there some potent force behind him?

Without a word Colonel Jehu crawled into the stage and deposited himself upon the front seat; where, in some mysterious way, room had been made for him. Then Charley Hutter tightened his gripe on the lines, the men who were at the horses' heads let go, and the coach was off, bound for Blue Tank, or a market.

Of the inside passengers two were women. One of them Colonel Jehu scarcely had more than a glimpse of as he entered, but even in that he could see that she was strangely beautiful, though her face had a dusky hue, and her straight black hair, and rather high cheekbones seemed to indicate a dash of Indian blood in her veins.

She sat looking straight before her, and, of all the passengers, she alone had shown neither alarm, curiosity or amusement at the little tempest in a teapot that the overcrowding of the stage had caused. An utter stranger, probably; and yet it was possible that Colonel Jehu gave a start as his eyes rested on her, though they did not again seek her face.

Just opposite to the colonel sat the other female—quiet enough just now, though she met his glance with a scowl. He did not care to look again, for she was grim, gaunt and ugly!

By her side sat a man of years and a cough, who was dressed in a cheap suit of brown, that was frayed and worn, while under his arm he clutched a battered old traveling sack of black canvas, which contained so little that he had rolled it up in a bundle.

The rest of the passengers were Blue Tankers on their way back to the land of promise—not counting some "tenderfeet" that were hanging on, outside.

The stage had not been so full since the day that Charley Hutter had first tooted it over the then faint trail, and that was in the height of the rush that had long since subsided. Not that travel had ceased, for Blue Tank was a town of some note as a stopping-place, and bade fair by solid growth to expand into a permanent city. There was a good chance there to invest capital of brain, muscle, or hard cash.

The road from San Mateo seemed reasonably safe—up to a certain point.

That point was where the stage route crossed the Salinas, only some three miles from town. There, as the coaches were grinding through the sand-bottomed ford, the road-agents were apt to swoop. As they came in force, and well armed, the "Knights of the Canyons," as they were called, usually got away with about all the portables in the coach worth taking.

And it was a remarkable fact that they seldom made any mistakes in that matter, always timing their swoops so as to strike the richest of the cargoes.

So accustomed to this game had the horses become that Hutter declared that they knew to an ounce the cash value of their load, and whenever it was up to the road-agent standards they always pulled up in the middle of Salt River of their own accord, and waited for the knights of the snaffle and spur to step forward and receive their toll.

These being the facts in the case, Charley Hutter as they came down to the stream, bent over and gave his inside passengers warning. He had already filled his outsiders so full of horrors that the most of them were ready to jump at the crackling of a twig.

"You folks in there thet want ter save yer watches hed better be slippin' 'em in yer boot-legs; an' it wouldn't be a bad idea ter stow away enough small change ter keep yer goin' till yer friends in ther East kin send yer some funds. Yere's Salt River, an' I reckon ther agents is layin' fur us. But don't try ary foolishness. They'd put this yere hearse ez full o' holes ez a skimmer. I hed one load thet war thet green, an' blast 'em I spent all night diggin' grave, an' ther stage company hed to lose a fortune payin' fur coffins."

Then his careless, bantering tone suddenly ceased, he kicked over the brake, pulled hard on the lines, and shouted sharply:

"Up they are; ef ye'r goin' ter shoot gimme a chance ter git out o' ther mix!"

From the bushes that lined the banks on either side carbine barrels suddenly had appeared, and the semi-occasional performance was about to begin.

"All correct fur you; but ef ther's ary green-horns aboard it's a chance ef thar ain't some more funerals. Hands up everybody outside; an' you inside throw yer weepins outen ther window. Ther's four insiders thet's heeled—one of 'em with two seven-shooters an' an assortment of bowie-knives. We don't keer fur ther tooth-picks; but we don't want no nonsense with ther shootin'-irons, so we'll count 'em ez they come;

an' ef ther's ain't five revolvers droppin' in ther water in less ner no time we'll open fire. Out with 'em! Ther's only one dropped so fur."

The road-agents seemed to be proceeding in a cool, methodical way, and as if not at all in a hurry. The inside passengers looked from one to another. The two women turned a shade paler, and were silent; the old man with the canvas traveling-bag clutched it more tightly under his arm, while Colonel Jehu suddenly opened his mouth and eyes to their fullest extent, listening as though the voices without had had the power to strike him dumb.

"Hi, in there!" continued the spokesman of the road-agents, angrily. "I don't hear nothing drop—we sha'n't tell you twice more; out with those irons."

"But, say!"

Jehu found his voice, and thrust his florid face out of the window.

"But, say! They might get wet. Cost me thirty-eight dollars a pair, not naming the holsters. You ain't goin' to break a fellow all up, be you?"

"Out with them, you infernal idiot, and don't be wastin' valyble time. Last time of askin'!"

At that the colonel cast his weapons out through the window, and then sunk back into his seat with a muttered groan.

"Thirty-eight dollars a pair, without countin' ther holsters. They know'd I was comin' an' want to break me all up afore I git that."

"One, two, three, four, five! Right you are, inside," continued the agents. "Now we'll trouble you to have your plunder all ready. Colonel Jehu will hand out his money-belt; Cuttler Davidge his grip-sack, and the rest ther buckskins. Numbers Nine and Ten step forward and take the loot and the rest of you keep your eyes peeled and your arms ready."

At that the serious work began.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CHARCOAL MEN COME TO TOWN.

OVER and through the bushes half-a-dozen carbine barrels still peered, while two masked men rode boldly out into plain view, and came down to the water. It looked bold; but after all it was safe enough, for who would risk having an ounce ball in his head for the sake of a little filthy lucre—when so much of it was to be had for the picking up three miles beyond at Blue Tank. Everything seemed ripe for a harvest.

But as they advanced the irrepressible Colonel Jehu put his head once more out of the window.

"Say, you there!" he shouted. "Don't be fooling all day over this job. The blue-coats will be catching up soon, and then there'll be a fight, and us poor shotes that's between the fires, will get plugged sure. Rustle around lively now, an' git!"

He held out a money-belt in one hand, a buckskin bag in the other, and seemed to be very much in earnest about it.

If he expected to expedite matters in this way, however, he was very much mistaken, for the two masked men stopped just at the edge of the water, while from the bushes beyond there sounded a muttered curse.

Then all were silent, with eyes bent rearward to where the trail was lost among the mesquite bushes.

Sure enough, far away in the distance they heard, or thought they heard, a sound, faint, blurred, that finally rose into the jingle of military accouterments. At least a company of cavalry approached at a rapid rate.

The two men came no further, but looked back as though to receive the orders that came soon enough.

"Ware hawk!" shouted the voice from the bushes. "Soldiers on the road; this is a dog-gone trap! As for you, Colonel Blowhard, or whatever your name may be, you'll hear from me again. You've been trying to play it fine on us, but we'll be even yet."

So said the voice potential, and a moment later there was the sharp report of a carbine, the vicious ping and nasty flash of a bullet striking flesh and bone, and a chorus of cries from the stage, as one of the lead horses dropped dead in his tracks.

In the midst of the excitement the outlaws vanished; apparently diving into the recesses of the chaparral, unwilling to linger longer where they might any moment be called upon to face the coming soldiers.

With the disappearance of the road-agents the spirits of all rose, except that Charley Hutter looked most disconsolately at his dead horse, as with grim hand he held in the plunging live ones. He was not altogether certain how the stage company was going to take the loss of the quadruped. In those days "horses was horses."

Three or four passengers began to speak at once. In fact they all joined in. The reaction set the tongues to wagging, and Colonel Jehu spoke loudest of all. To hear him one would have supposed that he had fought the whole gang single-handed.

"Fire and brimstone, gentlemen! Where would you have been if I hadn't bluffed 'em off? They knew me, I tell you, from the ground

up; and when they got right down sure that I was 'round, they didn't risk any more nonsense, but broke for the timber. I ought to pass around the hat, and I would if I wasn't so well fixed for the stamps. But if anybody wants to show their gratitude, just send in a contribution to the Foreign Missionary Society and credit it to me—Jehu Nimrod Ironclad Johnson, late Colonel of the Foreign Contingent. That's the way I do. I almost run that outfit, I do, just with these little tokens of remembrance."

"Oh, dry up!"

In the flood tide of his eloquence one of the male passengers dropped in a brusque interruption.

Jehu seemed shocked.

"Eh?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I mean it. You're all fuss and feathers, you be. Mighty big on the talk when there's nobody around; but dumb as a clam when you hear a man shout. Dry up, so we kin hear how close them cavalry fellows are. We'd better be jerkin' outer hyer afore they come along, er they'll ride right over us."

"Cavalry! Ha, ha!"

Colonel Jehu brought his immense hand down upon his thigh with a resounding slap, as he uttered his hearty guffaw.

"Cavalry fellows! Why, bless my soul, there ain't no cavalry within a hundred miles. That war just a dodge of mine to let 'em out easy. Ef they hadn't had some kinder excuse they might have plucked up courage, and tried a whack at us anyhow. It don't do for agents to crawlfish, don't you see?"

"You be hanged! Listen!"

The man spoke sharply and very much in earnest; and Colonel Johnson waved his hand, as though politeness demanded that he submit gracefully to a natural curiosity, and the rest of the insides lapsed into silence.

There was silence without as well as within.

Not a sound could be heard from the van, and the agents in the mesquites had evidently got out of ear-shot.

"Dog-gone singular, that!" muttered the man, looking around. "We heerd 'em, didn't we?"

Colonel Jehu remained scornfully taciturn; but the rest joined in a universal affirmative.

"Reckon they heerd that carbine talk, an' are comin' up keerful like. Fust thing we know they'll be letting drive at us, fur I tell yer they'll be so skeered thet they won't know a stage hearse from a gang of road-agents."

"More likely they've took ther back track. They've heered ov these ducks, an' they'd sooner go a hundred mile 'round than foller ther straight trail an' meet 'em."

A smile again appeared on the face of Colonel Jehu—these theories seemed to amuse him, though he had nothing more to say.

Instead, after waiting a moment longer for some one to lead the way he bobbed his head and sprung out into the water.

Charley Hutter was just crawling over the dash-board, while an accommodating passenger held the reins. The two very easily cut out the dead horse, and at a yell from all hands the stage bounced up the bank.

A few minutes sufficed to put things in running order; the colonel lingered a little, to successfully fish in the waters of the Salinas and then, with two or three other passengers followed the stage on foot. In less than an hour the whole outfit had reached Blue Tank.

From time to time various backward glances had been cast, but no sign was there of the soldiers, and what had become of them remained a puzzle to which the doubters refused to accept the colonel's explanation of expectant attention—which was beyond their comprehension.

The Palace was a combination institution, run by Robert Cairnes. The stage stopped there, it was the principal hotel in the place, it was the post-office, and it was the most lively opposition to the Tiger saloon right opposite, that the city afforded. It was a long, low structure, with an abnormal amount of doors and windows, and along the whole front ran a narrow, covered porch, on which the congregated wisdom and ease of Blue Tank was wont to assemble of an evening and discuss questions of local and national importance, from time to time making brief pilgrimages to the bar.

Such a crowd was waiting there now, as a sort of informal reception committee for Charley Hutter's load of pilgrims; and it was easy for them to see that something had happened. One of the leaders of his outfit was missing, and the other was trotting disconsolately behind the vehicle. Half a dozen forms straightened up and be an pouring a volley of questions—and then the questioners as suddenly became silent, for the inside passengers had begun to alight.

First of all came the burly form of Colonel Jehu, and immediately after him the two females, who were received by the proprietor and led away from the main herd, and almost before the crowd had time for a second glance they had disappeared from sight.

This left Colonel Jehu behind, and as he made an immediate movement toward the bar, the crowd instinctively drifted in the same direction.

"Set 'em up, Johnny," was the careless order of the colonel.

"Set 'em up fur me an' about seven more. That's ther number of our gang if me memory don't fail me. We've come here to stay; and don't you forget it. Blue Tank is going to flourish, now, like a green bay tree, and bud and blossom like the pelican of the wilderness. She'll have some one to talk her up—talk her up, 'way up. I'm here for that very thing; going to take right hold of the drag-rope and make her bounce. You'll think there's a fire in the next block and Number Twenty is just sailing round the corner. Step up, pards, and moisten. We're here."

The seven male pilgrims, that the stage had disgorged, were not backward. They surrounded their late fellow passenger; and as he threw a ten-dollar gold piece down on the bar heaved a united sigh of relief. No one wanted to miss a chance; but there had been a glimmering spark of suspicion that he might be a dead-beat of some kind. The astronomical observation was made, and then the seven fell away, leaving Colonel Jehu leaning alone against the bar.

At that minute a young fellow of twenty-four or five hastily entered the room, panting and breathless.

He was handsome enough, at first glance, though his clothing, once rather elegant in cut and texture, was somewhat torn and altogether disarranged, and his hair, black and curling, was unkempt, while his wild black eyes glowed with a wonderful fire. Fairly boiling with excitement seemed the young man, who halted suddenly in the middle of the floor, and threw both hands wildly up into the air, exclaiming:

"For Heaven's sake, is there a white man here?"

"I'm around."

The colonel spoke loftily, and stepped forward, though not even such a guesser as himself could imagine what was to follow.

"Then," exclaimed the stranger, "take this. Keep it for me until the danger is over. Hark! They come—but I defy them now. Ha, ha!"

He thrust a package he had taken from his bosom into the colonel's hands, and then, as though choked by excitement, pitched heavily backward, and lay senseless in the midst of the throng, with his white face turned upward; and on it was the pallor, almost of death itself.

The actions and exclamation had excited some sympathy, but more curiosity. The men in the room looked from one to another as if to ask what would come next—and the answer came from the outside. There was a clatter and rush of heavy feet, and then into the room burst a dozen men, at their head a sturdy-looking giant, begrimed and sooty, who, at sight of the limp form that the colonel was just raising from the floor, shouted, in a hoarse roar:

"Hyer he ar', boyees; now string him up!"

A dozen rough and brawny hands reached forward in no gentle way to relieve Colonel Jehu of his load.

CHAPTER IX.

VIGILANTE JUSTICE AT BLUE TANK.

COLONEL JEHU had already transferred the papers to his pocket, and was only burdened with the care of the young man. At the sudden interruption and clamor he sprung back with the motionless body gathered under his left arm, while his right hand dropped upon his hip. It was hidden from the crowd in front of him, but there was no mistaking the gesture. Without a doubt his fingers rested upon the butt of a revolver—and of course that meant business.

To be sure there were a dozen of the crowd against one man; but one man who happens to be an expert can sometimes make it exceedingly sultry for a score or so before he goes under. And then he might have a dozen friends, each worse than himself.

The giant called a halt by stretching out his huge arms to bar the progress of his followers. He had an honest face, distorted though it now was with rage, and he seemed to try to speak calmly:

"Stranger, I wouldn't be afeared to bet that ye'r' new to this hyar camp, an' dunno what ye'r' doin' when yer think ov humpin' yerself ag'in' ther charcoal crowd. They're squar', they be, an' wouldn't harm a sick kitten, but they stick together, they do, an' when you rile one you stir 'em all. But we ain't no bloody murderers, ez you kin find out fur ther askin', an' ef we're after ther young galoot what's tucked up under yer arm, it's acause he's p'ison ez a moccasin, deadly as a tarantule, an' charcoal camp hes decided it war time he war stepped on an' squashed. Give him up, Mister; he's killed three men this hyar blessed day, an' I wouldn't wonder ef he'd stab yer in ther back while ye'r' holdin' him thar, he's so p'ison-snaky."

Colonel Jehu's left arm slowly relaxed, allowing the young man to slide down to the floor, as he drew himself up and measured himself mentally with the huge charcoal-burner that stood before him. It was no fun to join battle with such a man, to say nothing of the crowd behind him, and small blame to the colonel if he temporized.

"Whoever this young man may be, I've no quarrel with you, for I'm a stranger here, just in at Blue Tank. But I want to know the rights of the story before I hand him over to you and your gang, for it's pretty sure the mourners wouldn't have to hold in their tears long for want of a corpse."

"Ye'r' right thar. That chicken, innocent as he looks, killed three men—three of our paid—and good men they were, too. We riz right up at him on the fust, cornered him, an' war tryin' him afore ez clean a court ov white men ez you'll find in all this hyar region. But jest ez we war in the middle ov ther case, durned ef ther p'ison leetle cuss didn't sling hisself loose, rip two men from A to glory with a bowie, mount a hoss, an' skedaddle. We pegged away at him with our shooters lively, an' he never even winced, but his hoss got it heavy an' dropped just at the edge ov this city. So yer see we've trailed him right hyar, hev ther law on our side, an' are goin' ter hang him er sack ther camp. Ain't we, boyees?"

A chorus of muffled growls rose in the deadliest kind of an affirmative; and cutting the air like a knife a shrill voice hissed out:

"Look out, Bill Bucket! You're foolin' away time, an' if you let him git off we may hang you in place of him."

"Don't crow too loud, Bantam. I'm doing this thing all fair an' squar', an' ef you don't like it an' want ter try ary gum games on me, maybe you'd better sail in."

"Well, thar he goes!" suddenly shouted the owner of the shrill voice; and at the instant there was the sound of a slamming door, which flew shut right in their faces. When Colonel Jehu had dropped the young man from under his arm he had fallen limply just at the threshold that led to the rear of the Palace. Now, some one approaching from that direction caught him by the leg, drew him out of sight, and, from the other side bolted the stout door against the unanimous rush that was shrewdly expected.

There was no mistake about that. The rush came. With a howl the crowd, that for an instant stood aghast, flung itself forward, led by the giant, Bill Bucket. The trouble had really begun.

Very fortunate was it for Colonel Jehu that no one happened to think of shooting at him, for he was as much astonished at the disappearance as the rest; and if he stood in the way of the rush, it was as much because he could not get out of it as anything else. Right at him drove the gigantic charcoal-burner, striking a ponderous blow as he came.

Mr. Johnson, late of the Foreign Contingent, was, however, more active than one at first sight of his ponderous frame would have supposed, though he was not as quick to produce his pistols as his preliminary actions would have seemed to indicate. He neither drew nor struck, but suddenly bobbed downward, and then arose with a quick toss of his head and an upward motion of his arms.

A very wonderful thing was it; for up into the air shot the heavy form of Bill Bucket. Johnson had thrust his head fairly under him, and by force of back, neck and arms, had flung the charcoal man right over his head, and then had thrown himself, with arched back, right under the feet of the coming crowd, half a dozen of which landed in a confused heap on and around him.

A very good plan this to delay pursuit—if it had not been for one unforeseen circumstance.

Bucket landed against the door with a tremendous crash, and fairly burst it from its hinges, since it opened outward. Through the aperture then leaped those of the charcoal crowd who had not fallen over the colonel, a view-hallo was heard, and then once more their escaped prisoner was in their hands. Then they looked madly around, and if they had found the person who evidently had endeavored to assist him to escape, it would have been bad for that person; but no one was in sight.

Yet some one had dragged the young man out and placed him upon a horse that was tied in the rear of the palace and doubtless if he had had the strength to hold on and guide the animal he would have been off and away.

But he had not, and he slid limply to the ground, where he lay in a helpless heap; though now giving some symptoms of returning consciousness; while at the crash of the breaking door, his unknown friend had vanished like a ghost.

It made no great difference, though. The young man was what the crowd wanted, and back through the door they dragged him, and into the room, from which there was rising a perfect Babel of sounds.

The half-dozen charcoal men were up from the floor, looking vainly around for Colonel Jehu, who had quietly slipped out from beneath them, gone out in the wake of the rush, and vanished:

"Where is he?" interrupted a voice, as they rustled around.

Bucket had staggered to his feet, and was looking about in a puzzled way, with his hand to the back of his head.

"Yes, where is he?" chorused the half-dozen,

though they stopped to see what Bucket would have to say.

"Only bring him out hyar and I'll tear him right into four pieces, I will. There can't no man handle Bill Bucket that way and live to crow over it; and the coward can't sneak off that way. I'll find him, I will, an' shoot him on sight."

"Hyer he is! Hyer he is!"

In through the back door streamed that part of the crowd that had rushed out, dragging in in their midst an unresisting form.

"Whar?"

Bucket heard the words, and did not hesitate, but fell upon the group like an avalanche. He threw his arms right and left, and if half a dozen did not get hurt it was because they saw him coming and got out of the way. So white with anger that his grimy face actually looked pale, Bucket caught the prisoner by the collar and tore him from the hands of those that held him.

Then he saw that it was not Colonel Johnson at all, but the young man in whose behalf the doughty colonel had been involved in the affair.

"Ah! it's you, is it?" roared Bucket. "I'll hang you now, and ther devil will roast you forever afterwards. Ther rope, boys, ther rope! We'll string him up right hyar!"

So far the charcoal crowd had had it all their own way. A very rough set they were, and when their passions were aroused a very dangerous set; but they had the reputation of being neither thieves nor murderers. If they had tried a man, found him guilty, and condemned him to be hung it was not very likely that the people of Blue Tank would seriously interfere unless through some personal feeling. A number of citizens had begun to float toward and into the Palace; but this young man was a stranger, and the gathering throng looked on with folded arms.

Only the proprietor of the Tiger saloon, across the way, carelessly asked the sharp-featured, keen-eyed little man that Bill Bucket had addressed as Bantam.

"Who is ther young galoot? what's his name, where does he hail from, and what's he been doing?"

"Too many questions, sport," answered the Bantam, hastily.

"They call him Vance and they say he's a sharp from the East, but what I do know is that he made a stiff of Gid. Walsh and carved Sam Perriot and Ab. Nye who tried to lead him up. Now, are you going to stop the fun? Say it quick, if you are, for the boys mean to carry it through, if they have to sack the town."

"Me! oh, no. Drive on with the hearse, if you call that fun. You have your show and you runs your risks. But what are they doing now?"

Tom Brown, the most unobtrusive of fellows as regards other people's business, was apt to look very sharply after his own, and at this juncture he gave a start, and a spring forward. Three or four of the charcoal men had started for his saloon with a yell.

"Oh, don't worry. They won't hurt you er yer s'loon," interposed a bystander. "They're only going to string a rope across from ther Tiger to ther Palace; sign an' lamp-posts is at a discount heur, an' trees is scarce, so that's about ther best they kin do!"

Sure enough the men made their appearance on the roof of the Tiger, and threw down into the street one end of a coil of rope; and from the top of the Palace the proceeding was matched.

Vance—for that was the name of the young man in difficulty—Herbert Vance was conscious enough now, but he uttered no word that might seem to be of prayer or entreaty.

No use would it have been for him to do so, yet it seemed strange that he should accept his fate with such wonderful calmness. Without a struggle or sign he suffered himself to be dragged rather than led into the street.

There he did give one quick turn of the head, one sweeping glance, that, to every man of the crowd seemed to be fixed on him.

Then he closed his eyes, around his neck was placed a slip-noose that was attached to the now joined larger rope, and up into the air he rose, as the charcoal men on either house pulled vigorously. And at the same time there was a rattle and rumble down the street.

CHAPTER X.

GENERAL SLOAT MAKES IT WARM FOR THE YOUNG SECRETARY.

THE little man with the fierce black eyes, who had so peremptorily ordered Colonel Jehu into the coach at San Matteo, turned, as the coach rumbled off, and walked away with the shadow of a self-satisfied smile on his features.

He had seen Mira Coyle looking out of the window, and he was not half-sorry at an opportunity to show her how he could manage these flaming fire-eaters of the far West; for the little man with the black eyes was no other than General Harvey Sloat, advisory friend of the Congressional Committee.

He nodded to the young lady—which was a

mistake, by the way—and strolled on toward a door beyond, at which Roger Vanclyde was standing. As he passed he gave a quick signal, a gesture with his finger that the committee-man would not probably have noticed if he had not been staring straight at him.

As it was he saw that the general evidently wanted to have a conversation, and without the least idea what it could be about he stepped out of the doorway, and up to his side, and then followed him, without question, until they had strolled some little distance away from the hotel.

"Vanclyde!" the general said, sharply and without any prelude breaking the silence, "I don't like your young secretary. He's not the right man; he is selling you out, and if I'm not very much mistaken he is a villain in more ways than one."

Twenty-four hours before Vanclyde would have heard this brusque attack with listless unconcern, if not with actual repugnance.

Now, with an undefined but gnawing suspicion already awakened, he was only too ready to hear what his friend had to say.

Yet he did not altogether fall in with the general, because he was not one of those who cared to argue a case where the criminal was not before the court. It had never seemed according to the policy of American institutions to condemn, *in contumaciam*, the accused. For that reason he only answered:

"Come, come, general, we could hardly get along without him; you know that yourself. Why, none of us would do the work that he does; and all three of us together, if we tried it, could not; while he even has some spare time on his hands. Don't make any charges against him unless you have positive proof, for we can't really afford to lose him."

"I'll admit that he's handy with his pen; but that's nothing. You can pick up that kind of men by the hundred, out here. They leave the East because they are too lazy to work; and come here, where they think they won't be afraid to steal. Some of them—mighty few in the crowd—find work with the pen, a few of them have the nerve to take pick and shovel, and a good many of them turn out road-agents, confidence men, and dead-beats. This Ward Farrar, I'm afraid, is a confounded extract of all of them."

"You must certainly have heard something. I don't know what we will do; but if he is such a man he will have to go. I wouldn't have Mira exposed to such influences, for it would be too dangerous. And yet everything I have seen about him combined to show that he was a gentleman. He had the best of references. You yourself seemed to think it was positively providential, our lighting upon him."

"That's just it. He is too infernally genteel, and his references were too thundering good. He has the manners of a confidence man; and as for his papers, I have an idea he wrote them himself. If I had my say I would find some way to ship him back to Frisco—give him papers to carry, or something that way, if you can't think of anything better; though it might be as well to discharge him on the spot."

"But we're getting on too fast. We have no evidence that there is anything positively objectionable against him, or if we have he's not to be trusted a moment longer. You must speak plainer."

Vanclyde might have a prejudice against Farrar, dating from the time he saw him *tete-a-tete* with Mira, but he was not inclined to let his prejudices interfere with business.

"How is this then, to start with? Perhaps you can recognize it, and if so you will know where it came from. I would hardly publish opinions so diametrically opposite to my own, and brother Beniah, however much he can take in, certainly never gave out that much information in his life."

And General Sloat placed in the hands of the chairman a copy of the *New York Herald*, doubled so as to show the head-lines of the article in question.

Vanclyde suffered his eyes to rest upon the paper, and almost a glance was sufficient, since he saw his own opinions presented in his own authoritative way, and supported by facts that had been drawn out in the course of their investigations. His report was anticipated, and worst of all, there were very few who would not think that it was at his own dictation.

"Point number one," said Sloat, "and no end of trouble it may give us, though they've no use to borrow anything on the strength of it until maturity. That's only a sample of what he is capable of. That's enough; if I wasn't able to give you some information about his private character. It's my opinion he must go."

"Yes, this is unbearable. I shall go at once and tell him what I think of it. I agree with you. He is not a safe man to have in our employ another hour."

"But—but wait! That is the trouble with you. When you do get started you're like a barrel of gunpowder. You go up in a flash. And I haven't come to my most serious objection to him, which we will call point number two. It seems to me a serious one, though per-

haps with your better knowledge you may be able to assure me that I am mistaken."

"Well?"

As the general seemed to hesitate, Vanclyde urged him on. Sloat had known how to strike him. A man less shrewd might have begun at the other, and really the more important end of the string.

"It is not at all well. See here now, Vanclyde. Confound it! I should not have allowed myself to fall into such a false position. I would not have done so either, if we, that is, you and I, had not been, after all, comparative strangers, and so I did not want to cross you. Miss Mira is rattle-brained, and all that, but she is handsome, fascinating and whole-souled. You couldn't expect us to be thrown together as we have been without my feeling an interest in her. Could you now?"

"Very true, very true. I'm sorry enough; but what could I do? And I thought, of course, she would remain in San Francisco with the Joneses. I never believed she would insist on making the complete round."

"Exactly. And the Joneses happen to be away. Well, what I want to say is, that she does not appear to fancy me at all—which is all right, though it gives me pain and mortification—and she does seem to take to Farrar, which is all wrong, because the young villain is a married man. He has already run away from one wife, that I know of, and, judging by appearances, he is willing to run away from a dozen more."

"What?"

This time the Honorable Roger was overwhelmed. It must have been instinct rather than reason that caused him to stammer forth:

"You must have some proof of this. How do you know it?"

"Because I have seen him before, though I had forgotten it when he first joined us. It came to me like a dream some little time ago, and I went to a great deal of trouble to send for information. When the stage came in it brought for me the paper you have seen; and this letter, which I now put in your hands, and the contents of which I believe to be thoroughly reliable."

Vanclyde took the letter and read it through with impatient haste; then drew himself up, as he handed it back.

"Yes, you are right a thousand times. No personal considerations should weigh an atom in the face of such facts as these. I shall go at once to him and tell him that having doubly abused our confidence, we will have nothing more to do with him, we will pay him and turn him adrift. His work can be done in some way or other."

"No trouble about the work. I'll vouch for it that we can pick up a better man on half an hour's notice; but I don't want you to be too precipitate. You ought to understand that he is a bad little man, with whom it is best not to embroil one's self a moment sooner than is necessary. I for one don't want to have any scene with him. And then he may take a notion to dog our footsteps, and make more trouble for us. My idea would be to invent some plausible excuse for sending him back, even as far as Frisco, if it should be possible; and then seeing that he never gets near us again. If you choose we can pay the salary of some one to do his work out of our own pockets. That will relieve your conscience as to any possible misappropriation of funds allowed the committee."

"Well, well, that is not my way, but perhaps it is the best. It won't do to make a martyr out of him; for Mira adores martyrs; and already I'm afraid she thinks too much of him. Of course we must have Holden's concurrence before completing what we contemplate. I think we had better have a conference at once, for, in such a matter as this, it is unsafe to risk anything by delay."

And still talking together in a low tone, the two men turned and walked toward the Monarch.

CHAPTER XI.

MIRA SAYS GOOD-BY.

THE Honorable Beniah was in precisely the spot where Vanclyde had left him half an hour before. The protracted absence of his friend and senior had not seemingly troubled him in the least, and he had scarcely raised his eyes during the fracas that had occurred almost at his ear.

He sat resting his fat face on his chubby hand, gazing with his fishy eyes into vacancy. He was a placid man, a very placid man. If he had any nerves no one had ever seen them; and if he ever formed a solid opinion no one had ever heard him express it. He spent the most of his life in placid abstraction, and divided the rest of it between agreeing with other people, and making money.

He had money, plenty of it, and it was always a secret to those who knew him best how he contrived to accumulate it. He kept his own counsel, as to that, and having slid into public life in the same placid way that he had into fortune, he was placed upon this committee as a kind of make-weight, it being understood that

the other two driving members would do the work.

"Well, Holden, we two, for once, agree," said General Sloat, briskly. "We have found out that this Farrar has been peddling our secrets, and that he is a dangerous character, besides. What do you think we had best do about it?"

"Ah, verily; bounce him!"

The counsel was energetic enough, but a listener, who heard his tones only, would have thought he was pouring oil on the troubled waters, they were so soft, and he waved his hand so gently.

Vanclyde understood that so far as in him lay Holden was willing to agree to any energetic measures, but as he had been thoroughly converted, to the view of the general, he at once began to explain.

In the course of a very little while a definite programme was arranged and the worthy chairman had started out to interview Ward Farrar.

Following out the suggestions of General Sloat the intention was to leave him at San Mateo, to take the next stage back, carrying with him a mass of papers from which to write up an extended report. Half a dozen other commissions were to be added, for the general thought of everything, and hoped that the young man would not see through the blind.

Ward Farrar was working away at this very report when Mira came gliding into the room, with a troubled look on her face.

The young man looked up, but the pen in his hand still hung over the paper. It had struck him that Roger Vanclyde had made up his mind that he was getting entirely too familiar with this straight-forward, yet somewhat romantic young lady, and he had just decided that he would stick closer than ever to his reports, even though it might leave her a little lonesome.

He saw, however, that she was in trouble, and for the life of him could not avoid coming to her help.

"What is it?" he said, as she paused just on the other side of the rude, rickety table.

"A great deal, young man," she answered, sharply. "I want you to talk quick, for there's not much time to spare. And first, I want to know if by any possibility you are a young man of truth?"

A serious prologue. The smile went off of Farrar's face as he replied:

"My word has never been doubted. When placed upon it, it's as good as any man's oath. I tell you, I would sooner swear to a falsehood than lie to one who trusted me—and I would not be likely to do either."

"Then, tell me, have you written to any one a summary of the investigations or conclusions of the committee?"

"Certainly not—for what do you take me?"

"And furthermore, were you ever married?"

A grim look dropped down on the face of the young man, but, he answered just as positively:

"If I must confess I must, and so I shall have to answer, I certainly have been. Now I want you to tell me what put the asking of these conundrums in your head—for I judge that you are not asking at random, and are going to allow me to explain at length."

"There is no time, and I am sure it makes no difference. You will hear more of it in a few minutes, and I only wanted to satisfy myself and put you on your guard. With these things as a foundation they have been planning how to get rid of you. Pray don't be too angry when they suggest your going back; and don't betray that I had warned you of the intention."

"But this is scandalous!"

"Of course; but what are you going to do about it? If they don't want you, that's the end of it. The Chinese must go."

"But I'm as hard to get rid of as the heathen. I'll wager any money that Sloat is at the bottom of this. I'm right in his road, he thinks; and confound him, he's not half wrong. I'll take him all apart if he goes setting them up on me. He's a sandy man, but he can't come crawling over me."

Farrar was in a rage and dropped into idiomatic speech that was different from anything Mira had heretofore heard him use. First she opened her eyes; then she laughed.

"There, there, that will do. I wouldn't take him apart if I were you; it would be high treason. Come, I gave you warning so that you wouldn't do anything rash. Now be a good boy, and promise me that you will make no trouble. You can't hit him without including Uncle Roger, who is not half bad at heart. Promise me."

She talked with an easy, careless swing, as though asking only for what she thought should be promised anyway; but if Ward Farrar had been a little cooler he might have seen how much she was in earnest. He was busy with his own thoughts, however, and did not heed.

"Give, give! you do not know what it is you are asking. Roger Vanclyde himself can scarcely protect you through the danger that I think I see coming. I dare not leave you—yet you are nothing, can be nothing to me. Bet-

ter, perhaps, to have it out with him now, and be done with it. You, at least, will be saved."

Perhaps, then, he was not thinking altogether for himself. Mira looked at him sharper than she had ever done. She was not easily to be taken in by theatricals, but for the life of her she could not understand how this could be anything else. She grew somewhat reserved—felt something of anger at the idea that he was attempting to deceive her, trying to break the force of what she had told him as to the charges against him.

"Nonsense, my young friend. That would all do for the Bowery, if the Bowery still existed, and not very well for anywhere else. You have been a good fellow and I hope to see you again—if we should take Frisco on our way back; but as you seem to be a family man it is not to supposed that I can gush very much at our parting. I thank you kindly, however, for your anxiety over my welfare, and tell you very solemnly that if any trouble such as you seem to anticipate should come, Mira Coyle is very well able to take care of herself. Now, good-by. Don't make me more trouble than I am bound to have anyway."

She held out her soft little hand, browned somewhat by western winds and sunlight, but slender still, and shapely.

He took it, frankly. The momentary flood of heroics was evidently exhausted.

"Good-by, then, if things are to be as you believe. But, whatever may happen, don't trust Sloat."

They shook hands like old friends, and then she glided out. A moment later and the members of the committee were approaching with their ultimatum, though they did not at all place it in such a light.

CHAPTER XII.

MISS COYLE AT THE RIBBONS.

THE charcoal-burners had it all their own way, since the reinforcements to the crowd, after hearing an outline of the affair were satisfied that it was a case in which sudden justice should be dispensed—and this opinion was strengthened by the advent of half a dozen more of the charcoal men, who carried between them, stretched upon a blanket, the form of one of his victims.

Ab. Nye was not dead yet, though he was a very badly wounded young man, who could be excused for wanting the services of a doctor.

As he and his bearers entered the limits of Blue Tank, they heard the shout that the crowd raised as Herbert Vance was lifted from the ground, when the charcoal men on either roof tightened on the rope.

"What's that, what's that?" asked Nye, in a husky whisper.

"Oh, it's good fer sore eyes, Ab., it really is. I don't want ter fool yer, old man, but I'd take my Gospel 'davy thet they've caught ther galoot, an' ar' a-bangin' uv him."

"That's 'mos' too good," groaned Nye. "Hustle along, boys, fur ef it's true I wouldn't miss a kick fer a dollar. Oh! But tote me easy! I kin feel his knife in me, yit. Send somebody ahead, too, to look after a sawbones. They'll all be out lookin' at ther fun, cuss 'em, an' we can't find 'em."

His friends were anxious to afford their wounded comrade all the satisfaction that was to be got out of this transitory life, and they wanted to see for themselves, so they hurried along faster than was prudent, and, as a result, by the time they had reached the front of the Palace their burden had all but collapsed.

Yet he looked at the suspended form with evident interest, and did not notice the growing sounds that heralded the approach of a stage, which came rushing along the road from the Salinas, the horses extending themselves in a mad race, while the cracking of the driver's whip sounded louder than the report of a revolver. Some one else was in a hurry to be in at the death. In fact, the Congressional Committee, minus Ward Farrar, were making their entrance, and were coming in a hurry. They had a glimpse of Western usage.

The special coach which, under the skillful pilotage of Jack O'Brady, was carrying them to their destination, had met with a little adventure.

It was not the first time that Mira had taken a seat outside, on the driver's box, but it was the first time that she had induced O'Brady, who was as gallant an Irishman as ever drew breath, to resign the lines into her hand. Probably she had not urged the case seriously before. Ward Farrar had always been there to keep her in order.

His absence seemed to bring a strange sense of freedom. She would have danced, probably, if the top of the coach had offered a secure footing. She sung anyway, making the somewhat dreary road vocal with her music. And finally, as the dusk of the coming twilight began to settle around she reached confidentially over and drew the lines from O'Brady's hands, in spite of his laughing protest.

"Oh come, Mr. O'Brady, I can't try my hand at a better time. They are fresh enough to make it fun, and they're tired enough not to be savage. I've driven a team often enough, and

I know I can manage six in hand. Do quit bothering and let me have something of a chance."

"Arrah, thin, an' it's a chance for a shpill that you'll have, fur thim laders, bad 'cess to their sows, have been crazy fur a go, an' it's me wrists that are well-nigh broke with the howldin' av 'em. Ah, look out there! Ther oogly bastes knows it already."

The leaders, that for the last three or four miles, under Jack's steady wrists, had subsided into steady going, had their ears up, and as he spoke gave a sudden plunge as though bent on a bolt.

O'Brady kicked over the brake and placed his foot upon it lightly, ready for trouble, and made a movement to recover the reins.

"Oh, not a bit of it, Mr. O'Brady. They are as kind as kittens. It is time they had a chance to frolic a little, and as long as I can hold them straight, why shouldn't they go? There, now! They are on the straight road, and it's grand fun. Houp, la!"

She drew herself back with a burlesque on the professional driver's manner, bracing her tiny feet, and shouted to her team.

At that the wheelers, which had not as yet broken their trot, sprung forward, and before O'Brady could further interfere, the team in the swing had taken up the gallop, and the six were away at a tearing pace.

"Howly mither!" exclaimed Jack. "Ther bastes hev gone clane crazy. They must'a seen s'uthin' in the mesquites. They'll shpill us in ther foord! Howld 'em tight, wid a long pull! Blue murder! ef ther agints is waitin' there they'll lay thim leaders cowlid, an' pile us up in an awful wreck."

"The agents?"

As yet Mira was not at all alarmed. Her steeds were not altogether away with her; but the mention of "agents," a word of whose meaning she was not altogether ignorant, added several new thrills to her excitement.

"Yes, the agints! It's tin to wan but they know yer comin', an' will be waitin' at the foord. If they are, howld 'em fur all yer wuth. We're 'most there now."

"And do you stop for the villains? I never would. I shall drive right through. They would hardly harm a woman."

"Fur ther love av heaven don't yez thry it. It's no good to think ov that. Sure, Mike Donnavan did, an' they kilt him an' his team ontirely, an' ther kimpany sued ther widdy fur the valley av ther bastes. Howld yer hands up an' down wid ther brakes when yez hear them shout. Thet's ther way to be ther boss driver."

O'Brady's speech was perhaps somewhat metaphorical, but it had the germ of truth in it. If he had had a little more time to argue the case he might even have converted Mira to his way of thinking. But time was scant—too scant even to reclaim the lines, for while he spoke the horses sprung down the bank, and plunged into the shallow waters of the ford.

At that moment, as usual, came the cry to halt.

Some of the agents, after the fiasco with the regular coach, had come scouting back, and being in a bad humor, decided to make the most of what Providence sent them, though they were without their accustomed information in regard to what was falling into their net.

The horses came down into the bed of the Salinas with a jolt, and the strain on the traces would have broken weaker leather, or stopped a less ambitious team. As it was there was a slackening of the speed, so that the highway-men did not doubt but that their commands were to be obeyed as usual. They had not yet caught a fair sight of the driver, for it was already dusk.

"It's all right!" yelled Jack O'Brady at the top of his lungs. "Fur ther lov' o' hivin don't shoot, for it's a load av extry p'aceables we have!"

And at that minute the whip hissed down over the horses with a drawing cut, that seemed to take them all, from near leader to off wheeler, and the six gave one simultaneous bound that lifted the coach through the Salt river, as it had never been lifted before.

Straight up the bank it swung, in defiance of several flashes followed by quick reports and the vicious ping of bullets.

For once the agents had been too carelessly confident, and firing in haste, and too late, they had missed both driver and team, and the vehicle dashed safely by their place of ambush.

Maddened by what seemed an actual treachery three men with faces well masked sprung out into the road, and raised their pistols in deliberate aim at the vanishing vehicle.

"Whoop! Musha, but we've did it! Gimme ther ribbons, an' you git down inter ther boot. We may hear from 'em ag'in; I'll hold 'em stiddy."

This time Mira did not resist. She had a great deal of nerve; but she had heard the hiss of a bullet that almost grazed her head, and she thought that was enough for glory. No sooner had she felt the reins drawn from her hands than she dodged down out of sight of the enemy in the rear.

Nevertheless, she was only there for an instant, when she peeped out from the side to see what was going on.

The first thing she saw was General Sloat, leaning out with a pistol in his hand, looking anxiously back. Further on the three road-agents were bounding into sight, and then, behind them a little distance, there was coming a man on a mustang—Bart Brandon, their guide, scout and what not, who had happened to be in the rear instead of the advance.

So far his post had been rather a sinecure, and as he was inclined to be either sullen or shy, Mira had supposed that he was a useless adjunct.

He proved his courage and usefulness now. Over the neck of his mustang he had cast his reins, and with a revolver in either hand he rode straight upon the agents.

There was a crash, a shout. Two men dropped on the sand, the third scrambled back into mesquite for dear life, and the scout came through at a gallop. In a minute he had done more toward exterminating the bandits of Blue Tank than had been done by the combined travel for a year.

General Sloat gave what seemed to be a sigh of relief, and returned his revolver to its receptacle at his hip. He heard the voices of Mira and the driver, and knew that no harm had come to the party.

He called to Mira now:

"Miss Coyle, you see what comes of your frolic. The place outside is full of danger, and it is Heaven's mercy that you were not hit. Come down and take your place with us."

The answer was a ringing laugh. If she had not had the team in hand, they would have had a more prolonged interview with the road-agents, with, perhaps, not as comfortable an ending. And then she shuddered at, even while she admired, the unhesitating manner in which Bart Brandon had charged straight at the three men. She did not think that it was mere child's play, since he was a dead shot, and as the sand had muffled the tread of his mustang he had been able to come upon them unawares, and from behind.

The laugh was the sole answer she gave to General Sloat; and it was only when the Honorable Vanclyde thrust his head out with an anxious inquiry as to her safety, and what it was all about, that she lightly replied:

"Nothing wrong, dear; only that we are famous. We have been attacked by robbers and came off victorious, though Bart Brandon seems to be the hero of the occasion as far as fighting goes. Keep quiet now, and hold on. We are going to take Blue Tank by storm. They will think there is an earthquake coming when they hear our wheels. Houp, la!"

She cracked the whip, as she had well learned how, and the stage flew still faster onward.

So it happened that just as the dangling body of the young man swung into the air between the Palace and Tiger the special coach came roaring through the town.

CHAPTER XIII.

MISS MIRA CHIPS IN.

THERE were boys in Blue Tank as well as in other towns, and as they were brought up on the ragged edge of the frontier, the summary execution of justice, which was to take off a red-handed assassin, struck them rather in the light of a frolic. About the time that Vance rose in the air the flames of a hastily-kindled bonfire began to illuminate the night air. As the special coach came whirling down the street Mira, from her perch by the side of O'Brady, saw a phase of western life and law that she would willingly have escaped.

In the air was the dark, dangling form, while below, with upturned faces, stood the crowd.

At the sight her hand closed nervously on O'Brien's arm.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed. "What is that?"

"Looks loike a hangin' match, an' it's roight in front av ther Tiger, d'yer moind. Onpleasant sorter a crowd ter take a lady inter, but ye'r' in fur it. Ther's sorra a bit av another daint place to go; an' sure ther Palace is hard enough."

A cry came from Mira's lips.

"Oh, horrible, horrible! The fiends! It shall not be! Listen! Drive under him—directly under him!"

The girl leaped to her feet as she spoke, and caught from O'Brady's belt the heavy, keen knife that hung there. Then she sprang to the top of the coach and stood there, erect, motionless, with gleaming eyes fixed on the dangling form, and her face pale with intense excitement.

"Wirra, wirra, but what would yez do? Is it face that crowd yez have the moind to? Faith, an' it's a dead darlint that you'll be! Shtop, shtop!"

O'Brady was in earnest.

Gallant Irishman as he was, and brave enough, too, he knew something of such crowds when the thirst for blood was on them. Bad as it was for a young girl to be brought ear-shot of the demons that such chas-

velops, and to face them in antagonism was something worse. He heard the voices of his inside passengers calling to him, and he set up a cry.

"Yer honors, in there! General Shlote! Mister Vanclyde!"

And at the same time his hands tightened on the lines, and he threw himself back as if with the intention of drawing in even yet.

"None of that. Drive on. By my soul I mean it!"

Right at his back he heard the sharp click of a pistol. From the folds of her dress Mira had drawn a little revolver, and as the hammer went back its muzzle dropped into line only a few inches from O'Brady's head.

"Your life or his!" she continued. "Strike your horses with the whip and on! Ah!"

Then up from the crowd went a roar, a shout, for the stage was in their midst, and to either side men fell back, gazing in wonder up at the slight form of the girl, visible by the glare of the fire; and as yet they never dreamed of her intention.

O'Brady's nerves rose for the occasion. He divined the purpose of the girl, and now called in his skill to aid her.

Right under the swaying form of Herbert Vance passed the coach, his feet just grazing the Irishman's head; there was a flash of steel, a single vicious thrust, and then Mira staggered and came within an ace of falling as the victim of the charcoal-burners dropped senseless into her arms. Her knife had severed the smaller rope from the large one.

Without stay or check the coach swept on.

Jack O'Brady had no notion to halt then and there, for he knew that if the crowd had gone this far, they would want to carry on their work to the bitter end, and even the prayers of a woman would not stay them.

Without any clear idea of what would be the upshot, he urged his smoking team, and before the charcoal-burners and the men of Blue Tank knew what had happened, the coach and its freight had vanished from sight in the darkness of the night, which, at a little distance, the glare of the fire only rendered more intense.

From the inside of the coach, as the roar of the town died away, there arose a chorus of sounds, and various heads appeared, protruding from the sides. Mira's uncle, who was not a fighting man, had maintained a brave silence during the momentary interview with the road-agents; Mrs. Ward had fainted, or next thing to it; the Honorable Beniah had slept serenely; and General Sloat had, as the reader has seen, sworn at large.

They were all awake now, and making noise for a dozen, though it was hard to tell what they wanted. Not to stop at Blue Tank, and yet what else there was to do even General Sloat scarcely could have told. He was not yet aware of the exact state of the case; but when he caught a glimpse of the crowd that rushed for some little distance in their wake, he had supposed that O'Brady, frightened by their aspect, had driven roughly through, perhaps striking down one or two, and thus had excited a temporary wrath. They did not for a moment dream that just above them crouched a fair young girl, whose face was white as death itself as she held in her quivering arms what seemed to be a lifeless body.

Mira uttered no scream nor sob. Her actions were almost mechanical. She held tightly to the body, that else would have been dashed from the swaying coach, but her face was turned backward, and her staring eyes fixed on the crowd, and the flaring fire, and the twinkling lights, and the dusky outline of the town.

Then all these faded away, except one horseman, who drew nearer and nearer, as he silently urged his mustang to a faster gallop. She saw him coming, and once more her hand fell upon the revolver with which she had enforced her command to Jack O'Brady.

Then she recognized in the silent man, who ranged up alongside of the coach, Bart Brandon.

He was welcome enough. Heretofore she had paid but little attention to him. He had been shy, and kept at a distance. As he was a rough and ready looking sort of fellow, of twice her own age, she had preferred him at a distance.

But now, having seen the way in which he struck in at the ford of the Salinas she felt that he was the man she needed—for she had no notion of allowing the young man she had rescued to fall again into the hands of Judge Lynch's executioners, criminal though he might prove to be.

"Hold on thar, miss; it ar' time ter look arter thar chap, ar' I reckon you've a minute er two to spare. You done it nice, you did, an' I say it. Dog-gone 'em, I've see'd such crowds work afore, an' they made me sick. Haul in, an' let's git a glimpse on thar young galoot. Ef he's a stiff 'un it's no uste ter tote him farder. We kin plant him right hyar; ef not he'd better git up an' git, lively."

O'Brady drew in his willing team, that for a mile he had urged on with voice and lash, and at the instant of the halt out came the four insiders, Mrs. Ward, hysterical; General Sloat, raving; Roger Vanclyde, very much bewil-

dered, and the Honorable Beniah serene as usual.

"Hyar, Jack! Turn yer critturs in hyar. They'll be outen sight in a minnit. Drive keerful, an' foller me."

It required very careful work indeed, but the soundness of the advice was so apparent that it was taken at once; and utterly regardless of the shouts of the committee, and the hysterical sobbing of Mrs. Ward, he turned into the mesquites and was soon lost to sight from the roadway.

At no great distance, however, he debouched into a little opening, and here Bart Brandon drew up while O'Brady threw over his brake and uttered his final, "whoah!"

"Now hand thar critter down, Jack, and see arter Miss Miry. Ef she ain't all broke up herself she's got more sand than most she critters frum thar East. Look out!"

O'Brady was just in time. He had flung his ribbons over the end of the brake, and now he seized Herbert Vance with one hand while the other slid around the waist of Mira Coyle, who was just succumbing to the horrors of the situation.

He caught her; and lowering Vance into the upstretched arms of Bart Brandon, he began his descent, with the motionless body of Mira flung over his shoulder. It was just as well that O'Brady combined the capacity of Samson with the capabilities of Jehu.

At the same time one and all heard a chorus of distant cries, and the sounds of pursuit from Blue Tank. The Vigilantes were on the move.

CHAPTER XIV.

BILL BUCKET ARRIVES.

On the night air the sounds of the pursuit could be heard a great distance, and there was yet some little time to think of arrangements for hiding or escape.

It was not at all certain that the cause of this trouble was permanently defunct, though he was very white and motionless; but meantime Mira continued in the swoon.

The other passengers had followed O'Brady's lead, and came up as he stepped to the ground.

At once Mira was surrounded, and there was a Babel of voices; but Holden opened his eyes to their widest extent, and stepped a little apart.

He was not supposed to have an eagle eye, and all that sort of thing, but nevertheless he had noticed that a few paces away Bart Brandon, with whisky-flask and friction was engaged in the task of resuscitating the victim of the gallows.

Vance was not dead yet.

On the contrary he had received the very minimum of choking that was possible. The running noose had caught in such a way that it had never fairly tightened on his neck. He at length sighed, sneezed, swallowed a little of the fire-water and then moved in Brandon's arms.

The Honorable Beniah bent down—and then uttered an exclamation, for he saw the eyes of the man opening.

"Am I living?" asked Vance, faintly, and his eyes wandered from the congressman to the guide.

"Well, I sh'uld smile," answered Brandon, with a dry grin.

"Where am I?" His voice grew miraculously stronger. "Where is the big, fat man that took my papers? Oh, I haven't forgotten him, and he mustn't try any gouge game with me or I'll kill him where I find him. They were mine, though the villains stole them from me, and wanted to hang me besides. But I ain't dead yet."

"More's thar pity, fur you've made no end ov trouble. Blue Tank had yer foul when Miss Miry chipped in."

"But the man, I say, that took my papers. Death and destruction! who was he? If they were lost I would just as soon die. Tell me quickly!"

To Bart Brandon this was all unintelligible, since he had seen nothing of the meeting with Colonel Jehu. The most that he could make out was, that his patient was on murderous thoughts intent. After the lesson that he had had if he was not incorrigible one would have supposed that he would have been cured of his mania for killing.

"Young man, I reckon ye'r a leetle wild. Ef not ye'r a cantankerous cuss ez ort ter be wiped out, an' it war a dog-goned mistake ter chip in. I don't know nothin' about any fat man; but I'd bet cheerful to thar bottom ov my buckskin thet if thar boys ov Blue Tank git fingers on yer thrapple ag'in thet it won't make half a cent's worth o' difference 'bout fat men, papers, er nothin'. You'll go under in five seconds, er tharabouts; an' a rope 'll be too slow ter suit 'em. You hear me, eh?"

"It's not Blue Tank," responded Vance, gathering strength and his wits.

"It was the charcoal burners. I swear I had nothing to do with them, or their pard; but they fell on me like a set of mad bounds, and then I did my best, who wouldn't? Maybe I killed a couple, but it was life or death. Now tell me how I came to be here."

"That young woman over thar, thet's comin' to ez I'm glad ter see give yer thar lift ez you was countin' up thar heft ov yer checks; an no eend o' trouble is it goin' ter give ef they find yer round. Take a fool's advice an' I'm done with yer. Afore yer go, though, g'in us yer handle. It may kim handy some day when I hear them askin', to tell 'em whar yer went to."

"Vance is my name, Herbert Vance. But you're not going to desert me now? I can't move, I'm as limp as a dish-rag. Help me through to-night and by morning I'll take care of myself. And some day it will be money in your pocket."

Very true was it that Vance was unfit to take care of himself, unless he was shamming most wonderfully well; but Bart Brandon was paying but little attention to what the young man was saying after he had once heard his name.

"Vance! Herbert Vance!"

He repeated the words over to himself, looking anxiously, earnestly, at the pale face resting on his arm, and hardly felt the touch of a hand upon his shoulder until to the pressure was added a gentle shake.

Then he looked around and saw the Honorable Beniah, who had his wits about him.

"See here Bart," that worthy said; "this is dangerous now. Really it is. Can't you get us out of this scrape? You are the man we pay to do our fighting for us, and here's the chance to earn your money. What you going to do about it? Those fools are all clean crazy."

He pointed at the little group surrounding the now reviving Mira.

The ears of the used-up Vance heard his words; his eyes followed the direction of his hand—and rested upon the face of General Sloat. A moment later the two were surprised to hear a succession of gurgling sounds something between a cry of despair and the snarl of a wild beast.

"He! Him!"

This much, at length, he ejaculated; and then Bart Brandon felt him feeby tugging at the revolver in his belt.

The scout rose to his feet, and as he did so held tightly to the young man.

"Right you are, Mister Holden! and thar best holt is ter git this youngster corraled safely somewhere in thar bushes. They won't stop hyar ef they know he's gone on; but ef they sh'uld ketch him hyar with thar rest on us I wouldn't bet on to-morrer fur any ov us very heavy. Keep yer gab ter yerself purty well, an' jist say he's lit out fur Texas when thar charcoal crowd kims up. Good-morning!"

It seemed rather a desperate adventure; but Bart never hesitated. Bearing the limp form of the half-senseless man, he sprang forward to the side of his mustang.

Throwing Vance across the animal, he leaped into his seat and urged the mustang away at a rapid walk, even while he was arranging his burden before him.

To leave the glade he had to pass close to the rest, and at that minute General Sloat looked up.

If Vance had been excited a few seconds before, the general took his turn now, as his glance rested upon the white face that was so clearly revealed by the bright moonlight.

He staggered back a pace or two, and threw up his hands. His first gestures were those of terror, perhaps.

Then a set, cruel look came into his countenance, and he hastily tore a revolver from his belt, and regardless of the danger to others, dropped it to a level with the young man's head, cocking it as it came.

An instant later he pulled the trigger, despite the little cry that came from the lips of Mira, who was now conscious but weak.

The bullet did not reach its billet, however, for just then Holden, who had advanced toward him, reached quietly over his shoulder and brushed his arm upward, causing the ball to fly wild somewhere among the mesquite tops.

"That settles it," said the Honorable Beniah, calmly. "They know where to find us now, and here they are. You can turn around and fight the gentlemen from Blue Tank."

Sure enough, guided by the sound of the shot, half a dozen horsemen turned hastily from the trail and burst into the little glade. At their head came Bill Bucket, the giant of the charcoal camp.

"Hyar they are!" he howled. "String 'em all up together!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE COLONEL INTERVIEWS YANKEE JIM, AND THEN GETS INTO TROUBLE.

WHILE these things were going on Colonel Jehu had practically dropped out of the thoughts of Bill Bucket and his men, although it was pretty certain that he would be remembered again when the present excitement was over. If he knew anything about Blue Tank, the colonel knew, whether wittingly or not, he had gained the suspicion and ill-will of a very bad set of men to manage, while he had made friends with none.

For this reason his disappearance was not at all remarkable, though it was hardly consistent

with the estimate of his own valor, that he had been so free in announcing at various times.

The charcoal-burners and the Blue Tankers, knowing nothing about him, were willing to accept his absence as a fixed fact, without either question or jeer.

But the ex-officer of the Foreign Contingent—of what contingent and in what country it had served were points that were never clearly elucidated—had not gone far. A way of retreat being opened, he took advantage of it, for as no one had offered to lend a helping hand, it seemed to him that he was scarcely called upon to face a whole camp of Vigilantes in the interest of one man, who might very possibly deserve all that they were about to give him. At the same time he did not wish to make his retreat disgraceful. He simply slid aside when every one was excited over the prisoner.

Vanishing around the upper end of the Palace he crossed the street, and, coolly sauntering down again, entered the Tiger saloon, which he found empty save for a single shock-headed youth, who, from his post behind the bar, peered anxiously through the window, and seemed to be debating the expediency of closing the house and going over to assist in the affair of the charcoal burners.

It was difficult to attract this young man's attention. He looked around when Colonel Jehu entered, but there was no recognition and very little intelligence in his face. As the colonel walked up to the bar he turned away and once more looked out through the window.

"Set 'em up, young man."

This order produced no result.

"I say, young man, plank 'em down, I'm dry as Gopher Run in the month of June."

Probably intense geographical ignorance prevented this announcement from having any startling effect. The black vials remained untouched upon the shelves behind the counter. He had no sympathy either with Gopher Run or the thirsty traveler.

"What a sweet corpse he'll make," muttered the colonel, in a tone just loud enough to be audible. "He's too ugly to bury that way, so I reckon I'd better hang him up and skin him alive. Then, if we part his hair in the middle, and loan him a pair of overhauls, he'll do to scare the crows, anyway. You hear me now?"

The bartender *pro tem*, certainly did hear him, for he turned with a howl of dismay. He had been resting with his hand against the window-frame and held well above his head. Colonel Jehu, as he ceased speaking, had slipped from his belt a bowie-knife and given it a fling at the elevated wrist.

Very accurate was the aim, for the blade, cutting through the sleeve of the jacket, sunk deeply into the wood behind with a dull thud, and then the young man was fixed tightly to the wall.

"Now," said the gentleman by the name of Johnson, "I propose to saturate. The only question is whether I'm to do my own tumbler juggling and finish up my little contract with you afterward, or whether you're going to treat me like a white man, and set 'em out when you hear me shout. That's poetry, but I won't charge you anything extra. And go slow, young man; I've got you covered."

The last advice seemed by no means out of place. The bar-tender had first given a tug, and then attempted to reach the handle of the knife with his left hand, but as neither attempt was a success, he began feeling around the hip-pocket, which fortunately was on the wrong side.

It was this last movement that brought out the words of warning.

"Dog blame your hide!" howled the young man. "You've got me foul, but when I get out of this I'll make you talk Spanish, see if I don't; an' if Tom comes back he'll bust you wide open. You better git afore that crowd over thar comes. They're just hangin' people thar now. Why don't you go and help?"

"That ain't the question. If I let you down are you going to apologize and set 'em up? If not—waugh! I'm going to grease your boots and swallow you whole."

"Pollygize—you bet! Hold on. Let me down, and I'll sling out ther bug-juice. Let me down; I'm missin' all ther fun."

Whether it was the peculiarly fierce appearance that the colonel's face put on, or whether the rising sounds at the Palace, the bar-tender changed his tune so suddenly that it almost took his breath away; and Johnson, with one hand still on his shooter, leaned over and drew the knife out from the window-frame. It had been put there to stay, as the strong pull he had to take testified.

The bar-tender looked up, thoughtful, and muttered with a shiver:

"I reckon that would hev gone clean through if it hed struck a bone?"

"Slick," answered the colonel. "That's the way I always send 'em. Take warning. Next time attend to business first, and you'll have plenty of time for pleasure. This way you lose both."

As the colonel spoke he inverted the long-necked bottle over a big green tumbler that stood by the side of a water pitcher.

"Jewhillikins! Hev yer had 'em often? Er don't yer know ther natur' ov Arizony benzine? Jim-jams are nothin' to what you'll hev if yer follers that thing up. You'll be wrastlin' with six-foot tarrantulers an' runnin' a brass foundery in yer innards afore mornin'. Ef yer ain't seasoned five fingers is sartin death."

The young man actually appeared alarmed, though the late unpleasantness must have caused quite a strain on his philanthropy.

"Thanks, little one. I've been through this region before. Whisky can't throw me, and I guess it don't make much difference if it does. They're coming this way now. Look out for breakers! I've saved some of the ardent anyhow, if they do wreck the shanty."

The warning seemed no idle speech, since at that instant the crowd had swayed out from the Palace, and hardly had he finished when two or three of the charcoal men rushed into the room, their leader carrying a rope.

"Hyer, boyee, how d'yer git to ther top ov this shanty? Show us ther way quick, er there'll be a lad er your size ready fur a funeral."

Perhaps fortunately the face of the colonel was hidden by the bottom of his tumbler, and he was unrecognized. Nor did they think of asking for information from him. They might have found some trouble, too, in getting it from him, though the youth was all abroad. He had paid little attention to one man, and was willing to show fight even, until the drop was on him sure; but fighting a whole camp, or facing the risen wrath of the city, was another thing. There was no hesitation now. He even forgot to look after the colonel and his change, rushing around from behind the bar to point out the path to the upper regions.

"He'll think I'm a screamer," muttered Jehu Johnson to himself. "But it's time to find out what this is all about. I guess the youngster is rascal enough to be hung a dozen times; but what's he been doing? That's the curse of my infernal modesty. It makes me feel modest about chipping in and asking. Perhaps a squint at his papers will show. Suppose we see?"

The colonel could blow hot and cold. He could raise a breeze on short notice, and he could be as cool as the North Sea whaling grounds. In spite of the turmoil and danger around him he quietly drew out the packet, and glanced at it in a careless way.

His manner changed in an instant.

"Death and destruction, what's this?" Hold on! I'll try another hand, and a fresh deal in this game!"

He thrust the packet into his bosom once more, and rushed out into the rear room, in the wake of the charcoal men.

A moment later he stepped out on the roof with a revolver in either hand, pointing straight for the men who were hauling on the rope.

The "fun" had begun, and the body of Herbert Vance had risen into the air.

Whatever had been his intentions, he waited a moment in order to obtain a better understanding of what was going on, and in that minute there appeared a new combination in the game, for along the street below swept the special stage coach, and he heard the roaring howl from the mob, as their victim was snatched from their clutches. When the charcoal men, mad yet bewildered, turned to make their way down, there was the colonel right behind them, holding the end of the rope.

"I reckon this game's blocked," he said, quite coolly. "There's a woman in the case now, and Blue Tank, like as not, will back her hand for all they're wuth. They'll want to sift the thing clean down before the circus begins again. We'd better get down and see what Bill has to say."

The advice was good enough, since it told about the only thing they could do. It also helped, in combination with the fact of his being seen holding on to the rope, to prevent any unpleasant recognition of the colonel as the man who had tossed Bill Bucket over his head. The four turned amicably and descended to the floor of the Tiger.

As they filed out into the main room of the Tiger, Colonel Jehu, who was last, cast a backward glance over his shoulder, and at that instant he heard what seemed to him to be a feminine voice.

"Hist, hist! Come here a moment."

This was followed by the sound of a smothered cough.

Without hesitation he turned.

At the open window he saw dimly a little hand upheld, beckoning to him.

He stepped toward the opening, and it was wonderful how lightly he could move.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"This!" hissed a savage voice, as he leaned out of the window.

Then, while a hand caught him by the hair to hold him fast, a keen knife blade was driven firmly down between his shoulders and he was drawn out over the window-sill.

"Quick, quick! Snatch them!" whispered the owner of the savage voice. "Some one may come."

"Yes, I have it. Ah!"

A dark, lithe form was kneeling on the breast

of the colonel, exploring his pockets, and had just drawn a package from the one at the breast. The exclamation was caused by a sudden extension of the arm of the victim, who seemed to be either recovering strength or in a dying flurry.

Back half-a-dozen paces was hurled the form, and at the same moment the returning charcoal-burners looked savagely out of the window above the colonel's head.

"Hold on thar, mister!" shouted the foremost, as he craned his neck through the window and pointed his pistol straight at Colonel Johnson's head.

"Yankee Jim sets us up on a new deal, an' yer needn't try ter slink outen ther game. You're ther man as hes a leetle account ter settle with Bill Bucket. Ef ther's anything left when he gits through, ther rest ov ther boys 'll hev a word er two. Don't yer move, now, er I'll paste ye. Hands up!"

"Up? Good glory! do you think I can reach the top of the house? My arms are stretched a yard now. I'm a sound, square, solid man, and can face Bill Bucket or any other man; but for gracious sake don't hold your shooting-iron that way. It might go off, and then where would I be?"

But at the same time the colonel looked quickly over his shoulder as he heard the sharp click of a pistol, and saw the dusky outline of his late assailant, who, at some little distance, from the shadow of the house, was taking deliberate aim at him.

Colonel Johnson was caught between two fires.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ROAD-AGENTS COME IN GOOD EARNEST.

THE rapid gallop from Blue Tank had not cooled the blood of the charcoal-burners a particle, and Bill Bucket was very much in earnest when he howled out that the little party of passengers should be strung up.

But first of all he wanted Herbert Vance; and a glance showed that he was not present. So the six new-comers halted grimly around Roger Vanclyde, and the rest, with hands on revolvers, not altogether certain what was to be done with these people, who certainly looked like non-combatants.

General Sloat had returned his pistol to his hip-pocket, and was standing with his arms folded; the Honorable Beniah, without a hat, and his long hair flying back from his round, florid face, was staring at the new arrivals, while the rest were kneeling in a group of which Mira was the important center.

"Whar is be?" continued Bucket, advancing a pace or two in front of his horse, from which he had hastily dismounted. "Shell him out, er by ther livin' grizzly ther'll be sudden sickness, an' bemp neckties fur this hyar crowd."

Vanclyde stood up and faced the man. He had seen angry crowds before; and he had had some experience in swaying passion-madmen.

"Come, my friend, you can hardly blame us for the freak of a foolish girl, who has already been more than punished for her folly. Respect the sex—as well as the dignity of the law-makers, whom we represent."

"Law-makers be hanged! I'm law itself. Ef yer hidin' ther young galoot we'll send yer back in a box."

"Examine for yourself. We know nothing about him, except that he is not here."

While the interview between Bucket and the chairman of the committee was going on General Sloat was looking keenly around, and his eye at last rested on one of the charcoal men, who had halted his horse a little back from the rest, and was staring straight at him, with a look on his face that strangely resembled surprise.

The brow of the general contracted.

Plainly the meeting was not altogether agreeable to him; yet he took advantage of it, stepping carelessly toward this man.

"You are wasting time here, Gid Gordon," he said. "He is off on horseback with, I suppose, a friend. They struck off yonder, going in that direction. If they know anything of the country they will be apt to escape for good if you do not stir yourselves a little more lively."

"Good for you," sung out the man, apparently overlooking the recognition. "No palaver er nonsense, but on ther trail every time! Whoop, thar! Thisaways, boyees! Hyer he goes!"

With the shout he turned in the direction indicated, and dropped right on the course taken by Bart Brandon, his comrades following close in his wake. Even Bucket did not linger; but casting a savage glance at Vanclyde he mounted his horse and dashed away with the rest, along what seemed to be a narrow but well used bridle-path.

As the sounds of the horses' steps died away General Sloat turned at last to Mira and her uncle. The girl had recovered her senses thoroughly, but remained strangely silent, though she manifested no particular fear. Perhaps she did not fully understand the danger which threatened them.

"Come," said the general. "It is time that we decided on what we are to do. We cannot remain here all night; and if we show the least

bit of a white feather Blue Tank will be out en masse to hunt us down. My advice is, to quietly return to Blue Tank, as though nothing had happened. I think I can guarantee that no one will molest us, for by the time they are through trailing Brandon and his burden they will have forgotten our existence."

"These may; but how about the people of the town?"

Vanclyde was inclined to be cautious.

"I don't think the town has much to do with the matter. If they once get to see us and learn who we are and exactly what we have done they will leave the matter in the hands of the charcoal men. Come. What do you say, Mr. Holden?"

He turned to the other member of the committee as coolly as if he had forgotten his excitement of a few moments before, when he was aiming his revolver at the young man in Bart Brandon's arms.

"Yes, yes," answered the Honorable Beniah. "Very good idea, brother Sloat. Back let us go, by all means."

And so, in accordance with the unanimous opinion, expressed or implied, Jack O'Brady climbed once more to his perch, gathered up his lines, and began the rather nice operation of turning his coach, before taking up his passengers.

The latter stepped back into the shadow of the mesquites, silent and waiting.

But as O'Brady had the heads of his horses turned straight for the narrow track by which he had left the main road there was a crack something less than the report of a pistol close at hand, and his team dashed away at a great rate; though not so furiously as they would have done had they not been so jaded by their fast drive from the crossing of the Salinas, three miles beyond Blue Tank. A masked man had stepped out from the mesquites, and brought down a heavy whip with a tremendous stroke across the wheelers.

At the same instant each member of the party felt the cold muzzle of a pistol resting on his or her forehead, and a rich, laughing voice exclaimed:

"You warped it to us at the ford, but here I reckon I've got the dead medicine on you all. Hands up, now, and no nonsense!"

After all, they had dropped right into the hands of a gang of masked road-agents.

"Up they are!" exclaimed General Sloat, with a readiness that seemed to indicate that he had been caught in some such scrape before and knew just what was coming. At the same time he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Drive on to Blue Tank, Jack. Don't you stop till you get there!"

O'Brady safely made the turn into the road, and as if in answer to the general's cry the cracking of his whip could be heard as he urged his horses down the trail toward the town.

A muttered exclamation burst from the lips of the leader of the road-agents, but he said nothing for a moment, while his men, with silent skill, twisted a rope around each pair of up-lifted hands, knotting them together securely.

"I've had more trouble from misplaced confidence than I have from my sins," began the captain when the operation was completed. "I'm not afraid that any one will cry out; but I do despise a snap shot when one is not looking for it. It gives no chance at all. You can kill a fool that strains his lungs; but what can you do after the fool has killed you? Go through 'em boys."

"You are welcome to what you find upon us, which will not be much," put in General Sloat in a low tone. He was awed somewhat, no doubt, by the implied threat. "We are in light marching order, traveling principally on bills of exchange and our reputation, and our wallets are in the stage and half-way back to Blue Tank. I am almost sorry for your sake; but deal with us gently, and perhaps you will have better luck next time."

The sarcasm of the general was thrown away. There was not even a trace of anger in the voice of the road-agent as he responded:

"Oh, well, this business has its ups and downs and mistakes in it, like any other; but we generally manage to come out all right in the end. I'll wait until we count up the house before I decide whether it is necessary to take other measures."

CHAPTER XVII.

HELD AS A HOSTAGE.

"BUT—but—I protest!" began Roger Vanclyde. "Why—why—this outrage is worse than the other. Or are you in league with the ruffians that drove us hither? And foolhardy! why a dozen resolute men are near, looking for just such as you. All I have to do is to shout and—"

"Be an angel. Ha, ha! With spectacles at that. Don't be a fool until the time comes. All done!"

He changed his tone suddenly, and his question to his men was asked with the short, quick voice of command.

While Roger Vanclyde protested his pockets were dexterously turned inside out. The same

expert performer attended to the Honorable Beniah, while a companion took possession of whatever valuables were to be found on the general.

Then the two faced toward their captain, and advanced with a military precision of step, and handed him the proceeds of their investigations.

He weighed the booty in his hand and laughed. "This is a joke. I should smile if I could do no better out of a party traveling by special, with scouts and outriders, and a young queen to boot. Why, I could put on the thumbscrews and get a bigger contribution out of a blind cripple with one arm. And, you fellows members of Congress, too."

"I'll swear we've got the'r pile," interposed one of the searchers.

"Oh, yes. That's all right. But in this case our usual procedure won't do. I really can't bring myself to hang a young and charming damsel."

He bowed low toward Mira as he spoke.

"Hang! What mean you? How can our death profit you? Indeed it would mean certain extinction for you. The Government would not hesitate, even if it took every available man in the army to hunt you down."

"But the example, my dear sir. Our rule is that all parties must contribute twenty-five dollars per capita. If they do less than that they have no business traveling and we hang them in order to keep up the average. Did you not see the notice posted in the station at San Mateo?"

"Surely that scrawl upon the wall was simply a wretched joke."

"Life is all a joke," answered the agent, coolly. "My proclamation is in keeping with the rest of it. I am not at all afraid of the disposable force of the United States Army, since that is represented by zero; but I am desperately afraid that the charcoal crowd will come boiling back before we get through with the execution. I am sorry for you, gentlemen and ladies, but there seems to be no help for it. Boys, bring forward the ropes. Any of you, by the way, who prefer going by bullet can have the opportunity by raising a shout."

"But this is worse than the savages," began Vanclyde, in an argumentative tone. "Even they respect the envoys of the Government when traveling in an official capacity."

"I am not a savage, however, but a road-agent. Besides, several of my trusty coadjutors have turned their toes up in consequence of the skirmish at the ford. For that, retributive justice is now in order. I see no escape. I shall have to bring you up to the average one way or another. If your friend, there, had been a little slower about the coach, we might possibly have come to terms. It's too late now."

Mira had dropped her pinioned wrists, and was gazing with some interest at the scene before her. The cool road-agent, with the silver voice and precise language, hardly seemed as desperate as his words implied. Her courage was all back again, and so was her curiosity. She wondered what kind of a face was behind the black mask, and could readily believe it was young and handsome. The girl was the most unconcerned of the party, and actually preferred this adventure to the one with Vigilantes, which it was a relief to forget.

Nevertheless, she felt herself turning a little pale when the ropes actually were produced and a noose was fitted to each neck.

"Good Lord! they mean it!" shrieked the usually silent Mrs. Ward, finding her tongue at last; and she sunk down upon her knees in another agony of terror.

"A moment, my friend. Blue Tank is not far distant, and I doubt not has its brokers. If I mistake not, you are simply demanding a ransom. Let us adjourn thither, and there need be little trouble in bringing the amount up to the required average."

The suggestion of Mr. Holden was perhaps foreseen, and its spirit met with a favorable reception.

"I see you are a man of business," responded the captain, "but unfortunately the climate of Blue Tank affects my nerves too strongly."

"Name a reasonable amount, and I pledge you my word we will send it out."

"Now you talk like a financier. Five thousand dollars is the tribute we exact, and you must bring it yourself to-morrow, at sundown, to the old Aztec ruins to the north of Blue Tank. You and your friends can go, if you choose to bind yourselves to such a payment."

"We will, we will. But we ask your further guarantee of personal protection. In the future we are to remain unmolested."

"Very shrewd suggestion that; but the treaty shall have such stipulation, and will be placed in your hands in writing on receipt of the five thousand. A proviso, however. In case the delivery cannot be made to-morrow you are to contract to continue the attempt the next day, and the next, and so on."

"But—"

"Oh, the alternative, after all, is just as acceptable; and justice rather demands it; though it served the villains right, since they were acting without orders."

"Heavens, no; I did not mean to object, I mean if anything should occur to render it utterly impossible."

"Very well, you will be absolved. I will still have my hostages."

"Hostages!"

"Yes. And indeed I shall be only too glad to extend the courtesies of my camp to a young lady from the East. For the present consider her under my care; and you three gentlemen—light out."

"Never! Do you think we are such cowards? What ho! Help! Help!"

The Honorable Beniah raised his voice in an unctuous scream, and Mr. Vanclyde joined in the chorus, utterly regardless of consequences.

"Scream, if it will do you any good; meantime don't be forgetting the five thousand. When help comes I would advise you to take the first train for town and interview those brokers. The truce has begun, and you are now under our protection. Good-night, Jack! Jim! Care for the calico. Off and away."

With a mocking laugh the two men designated raised Mira and Mrs. Ward from the ground, and despite the screams of the latter, bore them away into the shadows, from whence soon emerged the retreating sounds of hurrying horsemen.

Roger Vanclyde and Beniah Holden would have rushed away in pursuit, but they found that the ends of the ropes around their necks had been tied to branches well above their heads, and there they were, with bound hands, unable to loosen themselves, or do aught to aid the two captives who were being rapidly carried away.

They flung themselves against the ropes, but the tightening of the nooses warned them of the danger of trying that again and they turned their attention toward finding some practicable way of escape.

As for General Sloat he had kept his wits about him, and before the nooses were applied to his companions he had slipped back into the mesquites. By this time, with his bound hands held up before him, he was running at the top of his speed along the trail to Blue Tank.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CASTLE CANYON.

THE captain of the road-agents, from the eyelets of his mask, looked curiously at Mira. She neither screamed nor struggled, but only shrunk away a little, as though loathing the touch of the burly villain who had her in his arms. Mrs. Ward, on the contrary, would have made the air vocal with her screams had a gag not been skillfully applied at the first effort.

"Miss Mira—you need not be surprised if I know your name; I am well posted on the travelers through this section—I see you are a girl of sense. I have every desire to make your sojourn with us one that you can look back to in after years as a brief but by no means unpleasant adventure. So long as I command I exact unquestioning obedience from my followers, so that; really, you have nothing to fear. If you will give me your word not to abuse my confidence, I will place you, on parole, in a state of quasi liberty."

"Thank you for your offer, but I hardly care to pledge my word to throw away a chance, great as the temptation may be."

"I don't ask you to. Bless your soul, if you can get away from the Revenue Collectors on a fair deal, you're welcome to go. But we don't intend to have you bringing down any wandering scouts on us by foolishness. What we want is to have you follow us quietly and behave yourself like a good little girl. Eh?"

"My friend," and she shrugged her shoulders as well as she could at the epithet, "I'm neither girl, little nor good, and I feel disposed to despise myself for having been taken at a disadvantage. But I am a young woman of common sense, though just now somewhat unnerved by a brace of shocks. I am willing to promise to behave as well as a reasonable creature can be expected to behave, and angels could say no more."

"Very well. Can you ride?"

"Try me and see."

"Jack, give the young lady your horse. If it breaks her neck it may save yours. You can fall out at the turn and see if you can get a sight of the charcoal crowd, and what they are doing; but keep out of their way."

The transfer was made in a moment, and then, with the masked captain leading the way, and Mira following immediately in his wake, the strange party continued on its way until the pathway grew broader, when the captain drew back to the side of his prisoner.

"I am sorry that I cannot have the pleasure of escorting you to the Custom House, as we playfully call our head-quarters; but I am afraid to trust matters entirely to that blundering Jack, whose muscles are stronger than his head. You need, however, feel under no alarm so long as you keep to our pact. My men will respect you—if they don't, shoot them. You will also find my lieutenant there, with whom, I beg of you, don't become too intimate. One thing more. I have brought Mrs. Ward with you solely on your account, and shall hold you per-

sonally responsible for her. If, at any time, you wish to dispense with her services, I will send her to Blue Tank under escort. Now, good-evening."

He turned to one of his men and gave a few short commands. The man took his place while the captain drew aside and watched the little band file past him. Then he took the back trail, while Mira went on, by no means feeling as easy in her mind as she had done a few moments before.

Still she showed no signs of cowardice, even when her guide and guard directed her steps away from the main body. He simply said, "Ther old gal 'll jine yer soon," and she believed him.

Only once did she hesitate.

It was when, pausing, her guide and guard ordered her to bind a handkerchief around her eyes, so that she could not see.

She had a revolver, with which she was certain that she could shoot him down, after which she might make her escape at leisure. But the terms of her parole restrained her. She did as she was bidden.

Then the cold night-air grew more chill, and she shrewdly suspected that they had entered a canyon or gulch. After a little the way grew uneven, the horses advanced slowly and with caution, until at last the path was actually precipitous.

"Where are we going?" she murmured. "I cannot stand this danger in darkness much longer and shall certainly scream."

"An' blame yer I wouldn't. You is ther narviest piece in petticoats ever I seen. But hold on jist a bit. Ther wust ov it ar' over; an' reely you is ez safe ez in a rockin'-cheer."

The man spoke with undisguised admiration, as well he might. And he spoke truly, for in another minute the way seemed to be level and smooth, the air again changed, and she heard behind her the sullen clang of a closing door.

"Heur we are!" whispered her guide. "You kin take ther rag off soon ez yer like; but keep a mod'r'tly quiet tongue in yer noddle, an' don't go ter lip me afore ther lieutenant er thar may be trouble fur both, an' ther cappen besides."

At the permission Mira tore away the bandage, which she had fixed over her eyes with honest closeness, and gazed around her with as much interest as surprise, while simultaneously she heard a sharp, clear voice exclaim:

"Now, sir, what is this, and by whose orders?"

Mira looked toward the voice, with a strange thrill becoming conscious that she was in the presence of the lieutenant of the outlaws.

She understood the jest in the captain's caution when he warned her not to become too intimate.

The lieutenant was a woman, wonderfully handsome, with a wild, picturesque beauty that was well set off by the picturesque costume that she wore.

Woman though she might be, it was easy to see that she commanded both respect and obedience, for with a military salute the man stepped forward, and gave his report in a low tone.

While he spoke she looked from him to the prisoner several times, a shade of vexation visible in her face: but no signs of doubt or anger. When she had heard his explanation, she advanced toward Mira.

"I understand that you will probably remain with us as a hostage for a few days. For your sake I am sorry, as the *contre-temps* must be provoking enough, but for myself I am delighted, since your presence will vary the monotony of life here, that sometimes becomes utterly tiresome. I am known here as 'The Lieutenant,' she added, with a short laugh, "but if you prefer you can call me Vera—Vera Vane."

Mira was more puzzled than ever. She was a frank, free girl, ready for almost any adventure at all; but this was a great deal more than she bargained for, and she could not well conceal the surprise she felt at meeting in such a place a beautiful woman who seemed as well educated as herself. She had hoped to find something extraordinary on this Western journey, and here it was. Not precisely in the shape desired, however. Should she, or could she fraternize with a woman met under such circumstances?

As she asked herself the question she looked firmly into the girl-woman's face, and then, springing down from her horse, advanced with outstretched hands.

"Pledge me your word," she said, "that no harm shall come to me, and I shall ask no questions, but call you Vera."

"No harm shall come to you, save that which you or your friends may bring upon you. Have you not been already assured of that?"

"Yes; but hearing it from your lips I feel safe. Take care of me then, for I am worn out with fatigue and excitement, and need rest."

"Come. Save myself you are the first woman that has entered here."

"Then my companion has not yet been brought hither?"

"No; but she will come in due time. Caution must be observed. I would as soon they kept

her at the other haunt, where she may have to stay for the night."

"Will she be safe there?" asked Mira, in some consternation.

"As safe as here. Captain Vane has pledged his word, that never was broken to friend nor foe."

"Lead on then, for I judge that I am in but the outer court of the mysteries."

"You are in the stable of the Custom House. As you are on parole you need not for the present visit the prison; but I shall take you to my own reserved rooms. You can rest there free from the danger of intrusion."

The rooms spoken of were reached through a narrow passageway that seemed as though it might have been chiseled out of the solid rock. Certainly this was no natural cave, and so Mira remarked to her guide.

"Cave! No, indeed it was all chiseled out of the solid rock, which is easy enough to work."

"And who did it?"

"Ah, that is more than wise man can say beyond doubt. Perhaps some extinct race; perhaps the ancestors of the Pueblos, who are still to be found scattered in little villages through the land. We are in an old cliff dwelling, of which there are many to be found in the Arizona canyons. You will hardly recognize the fact here; but before you go you may have an opportunity to examine some of the neighboring rooms that are in the same condition in which their former inhabitants left them."

The room into which Mira was finally ushered was indeed strangely unlike anything she had ever seen, though replete with barbarous comfort. A lamp burned brightly in one corner, yet scarcely illuminated with sufficient clearness to distinguish the furniture with exactness, but the walls seemed to be curtained with red velvet, the floor to be carpeted with thick tapestry; around the floor were strewn heavy cushions, while in one corner was a couch that from the first moment wooed Mira, who had told simple truth when she said that she was almost exhausted from fatigue.

"A bed in a palace could not be more welcome!" exclaimed the girl, as she flung herself upon the couch. "I want nothing but rest and sleep. To-morrow I will be ready for feasting and confession. Guard me well, and good-night!"

She closed her eyes resolutely, but without an atom of bravado. In five minutes the singular girl was fast asleep.

Then the girl-lieutenant rose up from the great cushion on which she had been half reclining, and cast upon her guest a troubled look.

"She is a brave girl, and very beautiful, but she knows nothing of such as we. She should not be here. She is honest herself, or she would not accept our words in such perfect good faith. They shall be kept, too; but no one yet can tell what the cost may be. I wish Egbert had consulted me; but what he does is usually right. Yet it is a strange, crazy notion for him to take such a burden and run such just risks now. I wish he could be here to-night."

Then she loosened the revolver in her belt, drew out some blankets of Indian make, and threw herself down upon them, right across the doorway.

CHAPTER XIX.

GENERAL SLOAT FINDS THINGS HOT IN BLUE TANK.

WITHOUT more ado Colonel Johnson flung himself over backward, and just in time, for as he fell there was the report of a revolver, and a bullet whizzed by, a center shot for the spot where his head had been.

As he fell his hands struck upon the butt of the revolvers in his belt, but, before he could draw, a man leaped out of the window, striking upon him with a force that knocked the breath pretty thoroughly out of his body, and then came another shot.

Unfortunately it was a charcoal man instead of Colonel Jehu that was now in range. It struck him fairly in the head, and he sunk, almost without a groan, upon the body of the late member of the Foreign Contingent.

Those within gave a cry. They had not seen enough to understand the case, and one and all could have sworn that the ball had come from the weapon of the man they were after. No one saw two dark forms that glided away just after the second shot was fired. If their comrade had not lain upon the colonel so as to protect him from their fire they would have settled his case then and there.

The body saved him from the bullets; but they did not hesitate.

Out through the window rained the charcoal men, who tore aside the corpse and then threw themselves upon the man underneath.

After that there was a tangled snarl of men, and a sulphurous cloud of profanity, lasting for some ten or twenty seconds.

Then Colonel Johnson rose from the ground, sprung through the window from which there had of late been such a lively stream of human beings, and walked hastily across to the palace. He had flung the three men in three different directions, and he left them lying around very

loose, though none of them were seriously injured.

The young bar-tender, Yankee Jim, was standing at the door that opened into the saloon, on tiptoes, striving to get sight of what was going on outside. At the appearance of the colonel he drew back in amazement.

"You air one of 'em!" he said, quite respectfully, as the colonel stalked past him; and then he turned to listen to what was going on outside, for the men had gathered themselves up.

"I say, Bantam, ef he c'd git away with three on us when we hed him down, whar would we bin ef he hed been standin' up an' hed a chance ter strike straight frum ther shoulder?"

"Whar poor Jack is now p'raps."

"Yes, curses on him, he must hev shot frum his belt, fur he hed nary iron draw'd. Take hold hyer, an' we'll kerry him inter the Tiger. Maybe he ain't dead yit."

"Ef he kin live with ther top on his head blow'd off, he's a-livin'; otherwise, I reckon he's passed in his checks. But tote him in, an' then we'll try another hitch at ther ring-tail rooster. He'll hang fur this, sure."

"I'm a-toting; but I ain't so sure that it war his work, an' afore ther hangin' begins I'd like ter hev yer prove it. Now ketch hold."

Between them the men caught up their late comrade's body, and into the house they took it, though at the suggestion of Yankee Jim they laid it down in the back room, from the window of which the man had gone to his death.

"An' now fur ther fat man," said Bantam Hayes, a scowl on his face. "We'll take him in, dead er alive; but I'd rather hev him alive till Bucket kims back. He ain't ther man ter let him slide out; an' 'tween us, boys, ef there's ter be any hangin', it's ez well ter hev him fer jedge. Everybody knows he's a squar' man, but they don't know so much about us."

"Mebbe it's ez well they don't know no more," said the man who had already expressed a doubt as to the colonel's guilt.

Either Hayes did not hear the remark, or was disposed to overlook it. He led the way out, having already learned from the bar-tender that Colonel Jehu had simply and leisurely stepped across the street to the Palace.

By this time the people of Blue Tank were all pretty well excited, though it was generally conceded that this was none of their funeral. The exceptions were some of the roughs and toughs who had been on more or less intimate terms with the men of charcoal camp. These were buzzing around like bees. Bucket and the other horsemen had just started in pursuit of the stage, and in a few moments they would have had some dozen followers had it not been for the new ripple of excitement, first started by the sound of several pistol-shots in the rear of the Tiger.

Instinctively every one on the street looked toward the saloon, and in a few seconds saw the portly form of Colonel Jehu emerge. He walked straight across the street and entered the Palace.

After a brief interval three men came out, with pistols in their hands, and started across in his wake. They looked the worse for wear, and a close examination would have shown that two of them had very bloody noses, while the third had one eye practically pasted shut.

As they said very little while they went, the crowd outside had reason to believe that they would do a great deal, and for that reason, though they pushed up around the door anxious to hear, no one wanted to follow in, since there was danger of an epidemic.

Colonel Jehu was there, however. He had flung off coat and vest, and his flannel, which opened on the shoulder, being thrown back, Cutler Davidge, the gray-eyed old man with a cough and a gripsack, was dressing a wound that had been made in the muscles near the shoulder-blade.

It was the result of a knife-thrust, but it was neither very wide nor very deep, though the point of the blade had probably stopped in the bone. The hemorrhage had ceased—it had not been very great anyway—and the dressing was simply the application of a couple of strips of court plaster to the wound, which might prove painful, perhaps, but scarcely serious.

The entrance of the three men, lately his victims, did not seem to give him the least concern. He kept on with his remarks, which he had lately begun.

"I tell you, men, this town needs regulating. I've been on so many Vigilance Committees, and such, that I thought it was a square game here, and so I took right hold of the drag-rope and pulled for all I knew how. I didn't think he had pards laying back fer to git even. But he has—dozens on 'em. And there they were, about three dozen of 'em, as cowardly galoots as ever draw'd breath. They were afeared to try the crowd, but tackled me alone, after the rest had gone on. We had it, you bet, for I'm a slayer myself when I get down to work, and if they hadn't jumped on me in the dark and histed me out of the winder, that there Tiger would have swum away in gore, slick as a loom on a mill pool. But they had m' foot, though I was

going along the best I knew how when the charcoal boys chipped in. It was short and sweet then, but we got the best of 'em, after a few being downed on either side, and they stepped out. So feeling kind of sick I staggered over here to get a plaster on. Hello, my bully pards, did you flax 'em out, and how's the lists of killed and wounded?"

This last sentence was addressed to the charcoal men, who had pushed through the crowd and halted in his front. They had heard the latter part of his story and were ready to howl with rage, for from this sample, they could readily guess how far from the truth as they knew it, the balance must be.

"You infernal liar!" exclaimed Bantam Hayes, as he brought his revolver hastily up to a level. "We want you. You've chipped into this game an' played it fine on Bill Bucket, an' that was bad enough, but it was for him ter settle. But when yer put a bullet through Jimpson Jack's brain-pan it war a case fur ther Vigilantes ov Charcoal Camp, an' a hemp necktie. Don't you try ter draw, er yer a dead goat. D'yer cave, er don't yer? Say it quick."

One eye of Bantam Hayes was closed, but the other gleamed along the barrel of his revolver with savage fury. If he had dared he would have shot the colonel then and there; but Bantam Hayes was not one of the typical bad men, ready for any risks, and he was afraid the crowd would not stomach assassination, as they were in a virtuous mood and worked up for execution according to law.

At sight of the pistol barrel the eyes and mouth of Colonel Jehu flew open as if controlled by a spring. His hands were handy to the handles of his weapons but he seemed to have totally forgotten them.

"Oh, we mean it. You can set up your pile on this lay-out. Hand over yer irons an' consider yerself a pris'ner. When Bill Bucket gits back with the other murderin' villain ther court 'll set on you too, an' ef there's law er justice in this yere camp you'll both hang from the same rope. Come! shuck yerself ov them weapons. Er hold out yer hands; we'll tie 'em furst."

Colonel Johnson's surprise seemed to increase.

"Why, bless my soul, pards, are you going back on me that way, when I had hold of the rope? Why, I haven't been shooting anybody. I just took hold to help you through the drag, and came mighty nigh getting my light out. Ain't I in with you on the ground floor?"

"Don't yer try ter play innercent," growled a hoarse voice. "Jimpson Jack lies over at the Tiger with yer lead in his noddle, an' we've come ter scoop yer in. We hev yer foul, so kin down."

"Down it is; but it's all a mistake, as you'll see when my friend Bucket Bill gets back. Why, how could I have shot my own pard when every barrel has a lead pill in it? No, no. This here is a mistake you'll be sorry enough for. Why don't you roust out the men that *did* shoot Jimpson Jack? They're waitin' outside fur you, ef they haven't gone to help their pard."

"We've got you, an' that's enough; so hold out yer hands."

"Oh, no! If you've got me, keep me; I'm comfortable now, and maybe, if I held 'em out, you'd put the strings on too high up. Jist leave things where they are, and it will be all O. K."

The colonel seemed to have recovered from his fright, surprise, or whatever it was. He spoke with a chuckle, and as though he was not aware that three very mad men were standing around with leveled pistols. It was the bystanders that were surprised now—wondering that the trouble had not already begun.

But Bantam Hayes and his pards had had a taste of those brawny muscles, and wanted no more of them; while, until he made some movement for his weapons, they could not get things in shape for shooting him outright.

And meantime their revolvers were not cocked.

Hayes hesitated again.

Then he pointed to a corner.

"It ain't wuth while ter sling words with a bloody murder'r like you be, that's bound ter swing; but yer sha'n't say we didn't give yer a fa'r show. Squat there till Bill comes, an' ther fust move thet looks cross-eyed, I'll shoot yer meself."

"Now yer talk. This court is square as a die, and I'm willing to sit there and snooze till morning; but how about supper? I've the appetite of a royal Bengal tiger: grub first and the corner afterward. You don't want me to starve, eh?"

For a man that stood a good chance of being hung it seemed to be no very distressing alternative; but as the colonel was positive, a compromise was effected. He took his station in the corner, a table was placed in front of him, and on the table the remnants of a solid meal, such as the Palace supplied.

On the table, on each side of his plate, the colonel quietly placed his two revolvers, which the bystanders noted were at half-cock.

Then he proceeded to do justice to the viands, showing no want of appetite.

He might have been eating yet, from the un-

abated vigor he showed, when there came a sudden interruption.

A man, panting and breathless, with his wrists tied together, and without a hat, burst into the room.

"Where is the stage?" he cried. "The road-agents have been at us, and if they took that in they've scooped us of ten thousand dollars."

It was General Sloat, the *avant courier* of the Congressional Committee.

CHAPTER XX.

A DISMAL DINNER.

AT the shout of ten thousand dollars there was a movement of interested surprise all around. It was a large sum for the agents to get at a single haul from private individuals, and more than one there was wishing to himself that he had had a hand in the taking of it. There were plenty of men with lax morals at Blue Tank.

But some there were who were suspicious of this man, with his hands tied, while others again were half-inclined to imagine that if any robbery had been done the charcoal crowd, who had dashed away in pursuit of the coach, had had a hand in it. In the new excitement the case of Colonel Jehu was temporarily forgotten. Even Bantam Hayes turned his eyes away from his prisoner to take in more readily the conversation which ensued.

"Some one kindly cut the cords that bound the wrists of the general," and then he told his story through, though he, of course, could not tell the finale of the affair since he left before it was over.

But what he could say was that after the charcoal men had left them the road-agents had come and relieved them of all the valuables they had about them, and though the coach had apparently made its escape, yet, as he could see nothing of it along the road, and as it had not arrived at Blue Tank, with the road to which the driver was well acquainted, the inference was that he had been overtaken by the agents.

"And how did you git outen ther mix, mister?" asked a hearer, "an' whar's ther rest ov ther crowd. 'Pears to me it's a washy sort of a yarn anyhow. What war Bill Bucket an' his crowd doin' thet they'd let sich things be did right under yer nose?"

"I slipped away while Mr. Vanclyde was temporizing, and came to seek assistance. As for the charcoal men, they scarcely made a stop. As soon as they found that the young man they were after had regained his senses and taken to flight they hurried on upon his trail. They would hear nothing behind them, and I tell you there wasn't much noise made. It was speak low or take a bullet."

"An' how about ther averedge? What war ther sum total ov ther pile they took? That's ther important pint."

The former questioner spoke again. He was a sharp-featured, sharp-voiced man, with a face seamed with wrinkles, and a very red nose. He had but lately made his appearance, carrying a long rifle on his shoulder, which now, however, was deposited behind the bar.

"Unless they overtook the stage it was not very much, as we only had a little loose change in our pockets. Thirty or forty dollars, perhaps."

"That settles it, then. It wasn't up to ther reg'lar averedge, an' them agents hung ther hull string, sure ez my name's Old Dave White, ther war-horse ov the Mohavys."

"Hung them!"

"You just bet. That's been so much skull-duggery played on 'em lately—sendin' money through ther express an' hevin' guards an' all thet—I don't wonder at it. Didn't yer see ther notice at San Mattheyo?"

"But, honestly, gentlemen, you don't suppose they would offer any indignity to a woman—to a lady who was a relative of a congressman, to a ward of the nation, so to speak, and to men that were so near to the general government itself?"

"Don't think that 'ud make a pinch o' powder's wuth o' difference. Wards o' ther nashun ar' below par out heur. I draw'd sights on one ov 'em jist thet other day—a Navajo buck with war-paint an' feathers on. Ef you'll kin down to my lay-out I'll show yer his back hair an' blanket. We take in ther wards ov ther nashun on all ocasehuns ourselves. But et mout be wuth while ter investergate. Ef yer feels like raisin' a gang, count me, Ole Dave White, ther war-horse ov ther Mohavys, in fur one. I'd like ter see ef ther charcoal crowd ain't back an' moutin' 'em, anyhow."

The suggestion was fairly well received, but while the preliminaries of organization were being arranged there was a fresh arrival. Roger Vanclyde and the Honorable Beniah came staggering in through the door, thoroughly out of breath from the most rapid walk they had made for one long while.

When they had recovered sufficiently they completed the story, and there was a general murmur, while General Sloat seemed to go wild with rage at the idea of Mira being held as a hostage.

One man proposed one thing, and another

something else—only one stuck to the hard alternatives of the case.

"Business is business," said the Honorable Beniah, with a gentle sigh, "and I guess, my friends, that we had better see about raising the money. If O'Brady does not bring the stage through all right we will have to see what our credit is worth. Drafts and checks won't do us much good in this case; it will take good gold and silver. It will not be hard to prove who we are and how solvent; and if there is that much money in the place we ought to be able to raise it."

"That's truth offen ther bed rock!" exclaimed White. "But banks is hard up jist now. Thar's Brown over thar, of ther Tiger, he's hed a run ov bad luck, an' Cairnes heur ditto. They hung ther president ov ther Trust an' Loan Institution last week, an' ther cashier would 'a' bin reequested ter count his chips at ther same time, but he'd skipped with ther money ther night afore. Ef yer reely in a pinch, Major Mike Calligan is ther man yer want ter see."

"But the count is over at Boodle Bar, lookin' arter ther foreman ov Poker Deck shaft. He went day afore yesterday. I seen him an' Ebony Tom goin'. An' besides, he's an interest in ther charcoal camp. Him an' Gid Walsh, in er small way, war thick ez thieves. He's a bad little man when yer chuck chips in his road."

"Thet's so. I seen him goin'. He hed a double-barreled-shot-gun an' ther nigger hed a hull arm full ov shootin'-irons."

"An' Eucher Dave, ov ther Poker shaft, are a ugly man ter handle, an' don't yer furgit it. Ef it's in ther wood they'll plant him afore he gits through."

"But ef they do er they don't he'll be round hyar by to-morrer mornin'."

Various bystanders expressed their opinions, and having learned that this Major Calligan was their only hope the committee began to think of personal needs. Once more Cairnes overhauled the contents of his larder, and filing out into the dining-room of the establishment the three men seated themselves to attack the solid fare that graced the Palace table.

Mr. Vanclyde was too anxious and General Sloat too excited to have much appetite, but the Honorable Beniah labored for three, and exhibited no intention of starving before morning.

"I must say," remarked Vanclyde, with a rueful face, "that our troubles came like a whirlwind when they once began; and the worst of it is that every one here takes it as a matter of course. They are all savages and outlaws together, and if I was well out of it I should recommend more soldiers and fewer settlers. If the settlers would exterminate the Chinese, the road-agents the settlers, the Indians the road-agents, and the small-pox the Indians, it would be money in everybody's pocket, and advance the millennium several centuries."

"You are too sweeping, Vanclyde. We have struck the town at a bad time. These charcoal men are running it just now, but they are honest men, exasperated by the death of a comrade, and the citizens are willing to let them work their will so long as they confine their efforts at regulation to themselves. If they once overstepped the mark the population would rise *en masse*. You will notice that no one is drunk, notwithstanding the excitement, and that all things are done, for a lynch court, decently and in order. Mira shall be rescued if it costs my life, and—"

But just as the general began to warm up there arose a perfect pandemonium in the next room; a bullet knocked the knife from the hand of the Honorable Beniah, and glancing from the blade buried itself in the remnant of a haunch of venison before him; the sound of several more pistol-shots followed in rapid succession, and then came a snarling roar, in the midst of which could be distinguished the cry of:

"Hang him! hang him!"

The trouble had begun again. Bill Bucket and his men had returned empty-handed, and Colonel Jehu was once more in hot water.

CHAPTER XXI.

WRANGLING PLOTTERS.

AS the three charcoal men leaped through the window and flung themselves upon Colonel Jehu, two dark forms glided away.

A single glance would have enabled that man of war to recognize two of his late fellow-passengers; but though he more than half suspected that he had heard the smothered cough of Cutler Davidge, he had been unable to see, and did not dream that his companion was the black-eyed girl who, through the long ride, had never once, of her own accord, opened her mouth.

The two slid away like phantoms, and as Jehu gave his other assailants sufficient occupation, their presence was not even suspected by Bantam Hayes and his friends.

Panting and breathless the two crossed the street some distance above, retracing the course that they and Colonel Johnson had taken a short time before, and re-entered the Palace from the rear, without being observed.

A light was burning in a little room which the girl had secured and which the two entered.

There was a ghastly look on the face of the man. As they halted and closed the door a desire to cough attacked him, and the successful effort to suppress it racked his frame to the very verge of endurance. When it had passed he sat holding his sides, and breathing hard, though he watched the movements of the girl with a snaky glitter in his eye.

"Well?" he said, in a husky whisper. "Were they worth the life you were mad enough to take?"

"I did not take his life for these," she answered, in a tone as low as his own. "I would have had them at any cost; but when I had them I would have fled had he not been the cowardly, crawling, traitorous foe that he is. As a professed friend he took them, and then was one of those who would have robbed Herbert of his life. My own eyes saw him holding to the rope. For that I doomed him, as I would doom the rest of this cowardly scum that ravaged for his life. And once before I saw him—at Ariavaca."

"But what does it all amount to? Quick! Have I not gone into this thing with you, have I not furnished much money? Let me see them, my dear, and know the worst."

"Wait a moment. We will look over them together. Here, sit you down at this stand; and no tricks, for I do not trust you very far, Cutler Davidge."

A rough little stand stood at the head of the bed; and on it the lighted lamp. As she spoke she seated herself on the side of the bed, cocked the revolver two barrels of which were empty, and placed it in front of her. Then she proceeded to count the number of the papers.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven; that is the exact number. If any of them should turn up missing there would be a dead man. Do not fear but what you will receive your due share and proportion; but while we are in partnership I will hold the papers. Now look at them at your leisure; but hands on the table. When you take them off I'll count the papers again."

"But, my dear, what good would the papers do me without you?"

"And what good would I do you if he still lives? Ah, heavens, the shock! Is it wonder that I am wild, seeing him rising like a ghost, when we thought him dead; and yet dying when he had just come to life. The shock—is it any wonder I do not trust you?"

"Oh dear! And yet she trusts me with her life! She will kill a man before my eyes."

"Because you are the deepest in the mire. Why Blue Tank would let me go, and hang you for peaching on a woman. Yet while we linger here he may be dying—dead. What can we do?"

"Nothing, my dear, but look at the papers. He abandoned you, tricked you with a false story of his death, and I, fool that I am, spent much money to help you his wife get the wealth he left. And here I am in danger."

"No, I see it all now. I did not believe in him. He thinks I am false; I thought him dead. Yet, I saw his dangling body. Who brought him to life?"

"Better for you if he is dead."

"What?"

She looked up in sudden fury, and her brown little hand closed over the hilt of the revolver before her.

"You say that? Scoundrel! To serve your own ends you would murder him yourself, if these hounds have failed. When, in poverty and just from a bed of sickness, I met you, his old time friend, and we talked of the evidences of his fortune that might exist and the paper that showed that he and they were mine, you were willing to gamble on the chances. I promised you the half; but I swore to spend the other half in hounding down that mob, even as they had hounded him. Some one had been ahead of us and we followed the trail—that has led us to Blue Tank. Had you not heard my vow?"

"Yes, my dear, but I have heard women talk."

"Wretch! You had heard, no doubt, that he still lived, but thought, as he had sacrificed all he dared not make a sign. But win or lose I have at least found him. Had I had a single man to back me I would have risen against this mob as I faced the other. As it is—let them beware. The wealth I would have wasted on those other flends I can use in revenge at Blue Tank."

Her voice was low but tense; and her eyes were a flame of red-hot excitement.

"I did not really believe you cared for the man. Come! His money—our money—that is the thing. Think of that."

"Money! Bah! What is that to me if he had only lived. I followed that mock soldier, thinking perhaps he would make some effort in behalf of the man he had pretended to serve. I found him helping to hang him—no doubt to save his own neck—and I slew him. Take care for yourself. Examine the papers in haste and tell me what they are worth. Then, no more delay. In one way or another I must work for Herbert. Better would it have been to have followed right on and learned his fate than

have wasted time in getting what may be of no value save as being his, though we have come all these miles to find it."

Cutler Davidge ran hastily over their prize, and his eyes glistened.

"Yes, they are worth a life—or—or almost. Count them again. Are you sure there are but seven? Girl! have you lied to me? If you have, I can be dangerous, too. Beware!"

He leaned over and made a movement as though he would have caught her arm, but up toward his face rose the muzzle of the pistol, and he drew back.

"What is it?" she asked, her low whisper as cool as his had been high and full of pent excitement.

"One link is missing, the most important of all. The—"

Loud voices interrupted him. He stopped and listened.

The partitions in the Palace were thin, and a strong voice could make itself heard almost from one end of the house to the other. Trouble had begun again, and they could hear the deep tones of Colonel Jehu, followed by the piping voice of Bantam Hayes.

"Heavens! he lives yet!" exclaimed the girl to her companion when she had listened a moment in silence.

"Yes, and from what they say I wouldn't be surprised if you had killed the wrong man. I would give something to know if he has discovered his loss yet."

"What is his loss to him? Only too glad will he be to be relieved of their burden."

"I'm not so sure. I'd add ten dollars to the gift to know if he is playing a part. Arrant cowards steer clear of such troubles. Could you have failed to secure all of the papers entrusted to him? If so, our place is here. No good can we do Herbert, and our only plan to know his fate is to wait until the ruffians in his pursuit return. Meantime, if I can, I will learn more of this man who just now is the real puzzle for our solving."

So they listened in silence to the discussion between Colonel Jehu and his would-be captors; and then came General Sloat, with the news that one of the two, at least, was yearning to hear—that Herbert Vance had, for the present, made good his escape, and was in the hands of a seeming friend.

In a little while Roger Vanclyde and the Honorable Beniah arrived, and the excitement seemed to largely subside. The two listeners turned at last toward each other.

"This girl—who is she? What is he to her that she should risk her life where even I scarcely dare move?"

The possible answer was cut short by a renewed trampling of feet, and the sounds of voices, gradually rising, with the climax of pistol-shots, as detailed in the last chapter.

"If we missed any of the papers he had," whispered Davidge, "we're done for now. The Vigilantes have got him, and they'll tear him limb from limb."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE BAD MAN OF BLUE TANK TAKES A HAND.

BILL BUCKET and two of his men came back in no good humor.

Not a trace of the fugitives had they been able to find.

"This hyar's a blind lead," he had growled, after what seemed a long search. "It's ther old story over ag'in. It's whar the road-agents allers disappear, an' I've looked over it more nor once in daylight. You kin just bet he's one ov 'em hisself."

"But what are we goin' ter do about it?" asked Gid Gordon.

"I'm goin' back ter settle 'counts with his pards at ther Tank. Then we'll raise ther camp to-morrer mornin' an' roust out ther agents if it takes a year. Kim on."

"Go ahead, but I ain't givin' it up so, Mr. Brown. I'll bet my burro ag'in a hand-saw he's taken ther flat trail fur ther Long Divide, an' I'll foller it fur all it's wuth, ef I kin git a pard ter back me up."

"Heur's with you," interposed one of the men, who was more intent upon following their escaped victim than journeying to Blue Tank to see possible fun, and the separation took place.

As Bucket entered the Palace the first thing he saw was Colonel Jehu in the corner. He was leaning back against the wall, with his feet on the little table before him. Indeed, about the only thing that could be seen of him was his boots and the top of his head.

No difference. The boss of charcoal camp recognized him on the instant.

"Ah! Yer thar, are yer? Kim out while I take yer all apart, and don't fool about it, or ther fun'll begin with a funeral."

"Don't you touch me," said the colonel, sleepily opening his eyes. His hands, which were not visible below the level of the table, rested near his hips, and from his throat down he never moved a muscle. "Don't you touch me. I'm a prisoner, sitting here on my good behavior. I dar'sen't move till the trial's over. Then I'll talk to you. But if you try any games on me, I'll appeal to the protection of

the court. Come, now, I'm peaceable as a lamb. Ain't I, Hayes?"

The Bantam, thus appealed to, looked daggers all around. He had a suspicion that he had been bluffed by the prisoner, and he knew he had been severely mauled; it was not in his nature to wish to see Bucket go right in and kill the man off-hand, if indeed he could. Besides, the intimated appeal to him was flattering to his vanity, which had received a shock when the boss had refused to listen to the explanation, which he had tried to make immediately on his entrance. He ruffled up, so to speak.

"I reckon, Bill, ther duffer tells it straight from ther word go. He's pasted up thar ag'in' ther wall ter stand his trial fur droppin' ov Jimpson Jack. He let him right down in his tracks, an' it war a purty nigh thing fur ther rest ov us, fur he's got ther muscle, an' travels right along on it—you add that straight up."

"Jimpson Jack dead! Let me at him!"

Bucket fairly howled, and pushing aside the detaining hand of Hayes, he sprung straight at the colonel.

That worthy had dropped his feet down, but made no other movement until Bucket, with three or four strides, was almost upon him.

Then the table, impelled by Colonel Johnson's feet, shot suddenly up, and, striking Bucket in the face with a terrific splash, hurled him violently backward against the end of the bar.

One of the charcoal men, who stood at Bucket's shoulder, on the instant raised the revolver which he already held in his hand; but, as his thumb forced the hammer back, the upward swing of the chair on which Colonel Jehu had been sitting knocked the weapon from his hand, though it was discharged as it fell, the bullet being the one that found its way in to where the committee sat at the table. Then the chair dropped left and right, felling two more men, and, springing over their prostrate forms, Colonel Jehu just escaped two pistol shots as he clinched with a gripe of steel the shoulders of Bucket, who, in turn, was leaping forward to meet him.

It was a war of giants now, and the pigmies held their hands. There was always a chance for fair play at Blue Tank if the fun gave promise of being worth it. It was only a chance, however.

At the report of the pistol-shots there had been a renewed commotion at the Palace. The room was already pretty full, and the majority of those present desired to evacuate, while a number of those outside were just as anxious to get in, so that there was a medley of sounds. Now there came a sudden hush, and nothing could be heard but suppressed breathing and the shuffling over the floor of the feet of the two men, as they dragged each other backward and forward, each apparently straining madly for the mastery.

They were not so badly matched. Once before Colonel Jehu seemed to gain the mastery, but that was by accident or trick, and now, for the latter, at least, there was little room, since they had fairly clinched each other by the shoulders, and both were on their guard.

Suddenly Bucket withdrew his right hand, and, urging the full weight of his body forward, struck a sledge-hammer blow at the throat of his antagonist. Colonel Jehu was already against the wall, and the charcoal saw his advantage.

But just as quickly rose the arm of the colonel in a rapid parry, and then, with a continuing motion, his fist fell upon the face of the other. Immediately afterward his hand again found a gripe low down on Bucket's hip, and he bent forward, raising him from his feet.

Just then Bantam Hayes kicked the colonel sharply under the left knee.

The shock that followed was tremendous.

The two men came down to the floor in a sitting posture, with a vigor that seemed to make the whole house rattle; but, as they struck the planks, Colonel Jehu whipped out his two revolvers, their hammers flying back as they came. Into the muzzle of one looked the head of charcoal camp, while the other menaced the crowd.

"Hold one minute, my friends. I want a square deal and a fair trial, or I'll know the reason why. Am I going to have it? If not sing out and this little angel will fly up the flume."

As the colonel ceased speaking two men from behind threw a blanket over his head and gave it a quick twist around his arms, pinning them to his sides, while Bucket cast himself at full length upon the floor, to escape the shot that he expected would come.

It did not however.

The politic colonel recognized the fact that blindfolded he could not fight the crowd, and gracefully lowered the revolvers that were still visible, just below the blanket.

"A rope hyer!" yelled Hayes. "We've got him—now string him up!"

With marvelous celerity the rope appeared, and reckless, now, of danger, a noose was flung around the blanket at about the spot where his neck was supposed to be.

"Arrah, now, hould on, ye thaves. Phat's the m'anin' av this?"

The challenge was roared out with the lungs of a stentor, and at the cry every one turned toward the doorway from whence the words proceeded. A little red-headed Irishman stood there, with a belt full of revolvers, and in his hand was a double-barreled shot-gun, which he grasped very much as though it was a shillalah. "Phat the devil's all this fun goin' on wid the b'yes? Rowl out wid yer r'asons, er by the powers it's a hand Major Calligan will be afther taken himself. Eh!"

Back went the two hammers of the shot-gun, while the muzzle went forward, and if the barrels were loaded with buck-shot a discharge would be apt to rake the room.

There was a momentary hush, and then from under the blanket came a smothered voice:

"Death and destruction! You hear me? I'm Colonel Jehu Johnson of the Foreign Contingent, and I demand a fair trial."

"Can I belave me eyes?" shouted Calligan. "Sure, it does thim good to h'are the sound. Och, sure, an' it's me own supareor offiser, Colonel Jehu, darlint, Oi'm comin', an' it's we're the b'yes that'll wrack ther town. Let go there, yez spalpeens er it's me shot-gun that will be sp'akin' wid yez."

Almost before he was done Colonel Jehu emerged from under the blanket, a look of intense delight on his face as he held out his hand after thrusting one of his revolvers in his belt.

The two shook hands heartily, and then the major looked fiercely around.

"An' it's a swate set av thaves yez be when Oi'm not here to run yez. Phat's this all about? Sure, an' ain't he me fri'nd, and an honorable jintlem altogether? Ef Cairnes wor half a man he'd foired yez out."

"But, major he killed Jimpson Jack, and they propose to try him first and hang him afterwards."

"C'udn't be fairer," said Major Calligan, mollified somewhat by the explanation of Cairnes. "We'll view ther corrupse thry ther, jintleman, an' hang ther town. Go on wid ther case."

CHAPTER XXIII.

"IF BUCKET DON'T LIKE THER VERDICT HE KIN FOIGHT THER JOODGE."

ALTHOUGH the Congressional party were most anxious to avoid taking part in the brawl, and to keep in the background as much as possible, lest they might be called to account for having some part or lot in the late rescue of the prisoner, which they now began to see was a very serious matter, they had an ordinary amount of curiosity, and were far from being physical cowards. After the three shots they remained motionless for a moment; but when the trouble seemed to have settled down into a personal affray they cautiously moved forward to see how things were going, though they had no intention to run any risks, by mixing in the battle.

It was one man against a dozen, apparently; and a dozen more spectators were watching with absolute fairness, but with sympathies evidently in favor of the charcoal crowd. When the blanket was thrown over the head of Colonel Jehu the end seemed to be near, and Roger Vanclyde felt a cold shiver run down his back. He had all along seen that the only thing that saved bloodshed was the fixed determination of the charcoal men to bring the colonel up in shape for hanging; and his to do nothing that would force them to alter their intention. The congressmen had a fine chance to study ways and means in Arizona.

The advent of the Irish major was something more than a surprise. When he saw the one little man step in and quiet the whole crowd, for not even Bucket himself had anything to say, Vanclyde could not understand it. The major had not half the muscle of Johnson, and certainly with nothing at stake he would not be apt to fight nearly as desperately.

"I don't understand this," he whispered to General Sloat. "Who is this little man; and why is it that they let go of that fellow after so much desperate danger in getting the better of him?"

"Hush," answered Sloat. "Don't you understand? He's the chief."

"The chief? What is that?"

"The boss; the man that runs the town. He is the typical bad man from Bitter Creek, who is a thorough master of his weapons, and perfectly willing to use them. He only speaks once and then lets drive, without any reference to whether he hits friends or foes. With one touch of his fingers he would be certain to kill or cripple at least half a dozen, and then he would have his knife and revolvers yet. When he talks no one says no unless he holds the drop and is willing to take it. Listen now, and learn wisdom. I believe the two are going to fraternize."

Sure enough Major Calligan had uttered his enigmatical decision, and there was an immediate movement to "go on wid the case."

Johnson at the major's appearance took on a semblance of cool comfort. One would have supposed, from his looks, that lynch trials had become every day matters to him.

"Right you are, Calligan. We'll get this

thing over, and then spin a few yarns about old times. It seems like a dream to meet you. Before we go, though, hadn't we better tip up the barrel? I'd like to moisten myself; and like as not some of the court would prefer to saturate. Eh?"

"Oi sh'u'd shmoile. Shling 'em out, Bob, it's phat I wor afther askin' meself. Shtep up, me b'yes, an' drink rist to ther sowl av Eucher Dave. Oi planted him. Av it's Mike Calligan that's to be jedge ov ther case it's dhrink we all will, to better acquaintance."

And court, judge and prisoner moved up in a body to the bar, with the exception of Bucket, who had raised to his feet and was looking around in sullen, silent wrath.

"Hyer's to ye, count!" said half a dozen, with tumblers in their fists; but the eyes of Major Calligan roved around the room until he caught sight of the committee beyond the doorway.

He raised his finger, with an impudent leer.

"Kim out an' dhrink wid ther b'yes. It's an illegant chance to git into Arizony society, an' it sha'n't cost yez a cint. It's Ginerel Shloat oi shpake wid, av oi don't mishtook."

"That is my name," responded the general, stepping forward with an easy bow, and joining the throng at the bar. "I'm only too happy to have the chance to make the acquaintance of a gentleman who can probably advise me out of a difficulty. Business first, though. Here's to you, and the rest."

There was a general gurgle; and then a movement, in which Colonel Jehu and the Irish major, arm in arm, led, and the Congressional Committee brought up the rear.

The distance to the Tiger was only a step; but in the doorway stood Tom Brown.

"Thank you, gentlemen, for your good intentions; but couldn't you finish your business somewhere else, and not come carousing 'round here? Yankee Jim seen the whole thing; so he says, and he'll swear this coon never had his irons out. I reckon the charcoal men want to hang him anyway, and if the court breaks up in a row what's left of my shebang won't be worth much. I think this here thing's gone fur enough, and Bill Bucket and his gang had better waltz out of town."

"None of your frills, Tom Brown!" squeaked Bantam Hayes. "You've got the corpse of our pard in thar, an' we're bringin' the man that salted him; don't you hump yerself ag'in' ther law or we'll turn things inside out."

"Oh, I guess not. Thar's no use litterin' town up with corpses so I toted him over to Doc. Halfman's, an' put him alongsid' of Ab. Nye, that passed in his chips also. Ef you want ter hold court out here I'll set out two more lanterns; but I've closed this shanty for to-night, there's no more corn-juice sold here till morning, and the first man that tries to come in, except the major there, will need a plaster. Don't you forgit it."

Having said this Brown coolly turned, entered the Tiger and slammed the door behind him, just as Yankee Jim came around the corner of the house with a lighted lantern in his fist, which he hung on a convenient nail.

"Ther boss hes bumped hisself, an' it ain't wuth while to butt ag'in' a snag. Go on with yer court, an' I'll be ther fust witness."

Major Calligan was evidently inclined to finish the thing off-hand, and leave the question of Tom Brown's lack of courtesy until a more convenient season.

"Sure, Tom Brown is a lad av sinse, an' it's out here we kin attind to the case. Whist now! Shwear the witness, and let's hear phat he has to say."

The major took his station at his ease on a box that was at the doorway of the Tiger; the throng, and there were some hundred men in it, gathered around him. He held up the hand that still grasped the shot-gun, and as he shook it there was a reasonable silence.

Then Yankee Jim told his story, including his private interview with the colonel, and how he had followed the charcoal-burners when they went back to look for the prisoner. He was positively certain that there were two shots, and that neither of them were fired by him. He could see the glare but not the flashes themselves, which went to prove that they had been fired from a little distance. To make it clearer, from the position of the men a bullet from Johnson's pistol would have struck Jimpson Jack in the face, whereas the shot entered the back of his head. He reckoned that some blamed fool had tried a couple shots at the colonel, and was ashamed to let anybody know how he had missed it.

Bantam Hayes was put forward for the prosecution, and he asked several very shrewd questions, but the answers did not help his case much. Then, before another witness could be called, Colonel Jehu spoke up:

"I see I'm going to have a fair show, and I can prove, without wasting time, my innocence. Here are my irons, and not a shot has been fired out of them since I fished them out of the Salinas. A man with half an eye could see that; and if I had tried I don't believe they would have gone off. Squint at them yourself, major, and see if every barrel ain't loaded."

"Thru' fur you, kunnul, darlint," said Calli-

gan, as he examined first one and then another of the weapons tendered. "Oi don't think this case bez a leg to shtand on, an' begorra I begins to suspect it's all a set up job. If Misther Bucket don't know anything more, whoop out sumboddy that does, an' moighty quick, d'yez moind."

Several of the men who had their little tales to tell were examined, but there was no positive evidence. In fact from the first moment when Yankee Jim spoke it was pretty certain that the case would fizzle out, and no one but Bucket seemed very anxious to press it, especially since the little major had expressed his opinion.

"Oh, yez! oh, yez!" exclaimed Calligan, interrupting Hayes.

"The court foinds Jimpson Jack died ov soocide er a spesh'l Providence. Ther pris'nar is not guilty, an' ef Bucket don't loike ther verdict, he kin foight ther joodge. This boddly shtands adjourned till Tom Brown opens ther Tiger."

Bucket gave one step forward and then halted. The double-barrel shot-gun had dropped to a level and the hammers went back with a sharp click. He was actually white with anger, in spite of grime and smudge.

"Four ov ther boyees hes gone under, an' two is on ther trail, so yer think it's all right to set up this hyar game when we're thin-handed. Maybe it are. I know when the game's ag'in' me; but, curse you all, the day will come when Bucket gets even!"

"Hold right on there!" exclaimed Colonel Jehu. "When men like Major Mike Calligan ar' round I'm no chief, and I sing small; but if any man says I stepped on his toes or tore his coat, I'm here, solid, to try the case with knife, pistol or fists; if you want a shot at me, we'll step out into the road; if you don't put up, shut up."

With great earnestness spoke the colonel, and nearly every one looked for an answer in kind, but instead Bucket turned sullenly away.

"I'll bury my pards to-night, and to-morrow I'll go gunning fur road-agents. You'll keep."

Then he strode off, followed by his crowd, who seemed quiet enough when their leader no longer urged them on, while Colonel Jehu turned to the dignity on the store box.

"Put it there, old pard. An honest man always comes right side up on the home-stretch."

"Honest! Tare an ages, but hear the devil talk! He wor ther greatest thafe in Mexico. Sure he shtole nine saints an' three apostles an' thryed to carry off a church to kape 'em in. But he lid the b'yes brave as brass—where ther was plunther. Och, I know him ov ould."

Nevertheless, in spite of this tirade, the two shook hands quite heartily, while the crowd, having had a surfeit of talk, and seeing no prospect of anything exciting being done, began to break up.

Then General Sloat, followed by his companions, moved up and requested an interview with the major, who signified his willingness, and followed them over to the Palace, bringing with him the indomitable colonel.

CHAPTER XXIV.

O'BRADY'S STRATEGY.

GENERAL SLOAT and his friends were both surprised and alarmed when, not having seen anything of O'Brady and his coach on the way to Blue Tank, they found no traces of him in the town. He had had such a fair start that they were almost certain that he had beaten the bandits to Blue Tank, and probably raised the camp for their rescue. They did not know that the road-agent business at Blue Tank had been so uniformly successful, that it was more than half believed legitimate, and not to be interfered with under any circumstances. Indeed, the boys had several times gone down to the Salinas to see the agents stop the coach, and once had had the pleasure of accidentally seeing the operation.

What, then, had become of O'Brady?

The fact was that, having gone some little distance at a rousing gallop, he had suddenly drawn in his team, turned aside into the mesquites at a spot that seemed likely to offer a convenient hiding-place, and there made preparations to retrace his steps.

It seemed too much like cowardice for him to run away and leave Mira and the rest in the hands of the outlaws.

He took out one of the horses and removed the harness, with the exception of the bridle, and strapped a blanket on its back. Then he made a black mask by tearing out the lining of his coat-tail and slitting in it holes through which he could see, and arranged his weapons so that they were more convenient to grasp.

He was about to spring upon the back of his steed when a remembrance seemed to strike him.

"Be the powers, it'll niver do at all, at all! Sure an' if they should come along an' foind the coach while I'm gone, it's a foine haul they'd be afther makin'! I'll jist take the portables wid me to make all sure, fur it's in ther pocket inside that the jeneral an' ther rest carries their purse."

Accordingly Jack entered the coach, and after some rummaging found what he was after,

and what General Sloat had been so anxious to preserve.

Thrusting several wallets into the capacious inside-pocket of his coat, O'Brady emerged from the vehicle, mounted his horse, and started on the back track, looking, with his collar turned up and his black mask covering his face, as much like a road-agent as he could desire. He was the very picture of one of those who had fallen under the fire of Bart Brandon.

He rode along recklessly enough, his horse's feet making but little noise, until he reached a point within a few hundred yards of where he had turned from the road with his coach.

Here he dismounted, and leading his steed by the bridle, crept quietly in through the bushes, steering straight for the little glade in which he had left his late passengers.

There was very little of the Indian about Jack O'Brady, but chance favored him, and he managed to steal up into the very circle of the road-agents without discovery.

"Grate Caesar! but it's shoutin' they'd be if they knew it wor Jack O'Brady that wor bound in an oirn sthrait fur ther bluddy captain ov ther thaves. But sure an' Oi won't fire ontill Oi have to. It's shtrategy ye must use, me b'ye."

So O'Brady muttered to himself, and stood as much at ease and like the surrounding agents as he could. He did not yet see how he could be of any service to Mira, since single-handed he could not fight the gang, and she stood immediately between him and the captain. He began to realize that he had thrust himself very foolishly into a dangerous position; if recognition did not come before long it would be a wonder.

At length the business part of the interview was over, and then O'Brady saw his chance. There was a momentary hesitation at the captain's call, since only one man stepped forward.

"Begorra!" thought O'Brady; "he takes me for Jack, an' it's not so far wrong he is. Go in an' win!"

And forward he stepped, leading his horse by the bridle, as he saw the sure enough Jim do. If he had only known in time, he might have perhaps had Mira intrusted to his care. As it was, he received into his arms Mrs. Ward, around whose mouth was still fastened the gag, which had been applied to prevent her screaming. Holding her tightly to prevent accident, he took occasion to whisper:

"Whist now, darlint, it's a fri'nd yez have in O'Brady, an' we'll sarkumvent the bluddy thaves, or Oi'll niver say ther grane sod ag'in."

It was as well that Mrs. Ward was unable to make an audible expression of her surprise, for she certainly would have done so, and she actually struggled in the arms of the Irishman until a sharp pinch on her arm recalled her to her senses, when she could heed his sharp order to be silent.

After riding for some time, mostly in the shadow, a horse suddenly slid up at his side, and O'Brady was certain that the time of his trial was at hand.

But no—it was only the captain, to give his commands.

"Drop off here and make your way to the retreat by path number three. No foolishness or escapes. If she's not there within an hour of the girl, I shall hang you in the morning. You know I don't threaten often, but I always keep my word. Now off with you. Yonder is your road. You can't miss it, and don't you try to. The password in is 'owls.' The word out you won't need before morning. Away with you."

The captain pointed up a gulch, and O'Brady turned without further question, not daring to speak lest his voice should betray him. As he went he was conscious that one of the agents had been dropped at the mouth of the canyon as a sentinel, and a backward glance showed him the man hiding away in the bushes; in a moment he was concealed from sight.

"Faith, an' it's a nice pickle we're in, Mrs. Ward. Divil a wan av we knows path number three, an' av I did, would I take it? Phat shall we do? Sure it's lost we are altogether, an' sorra a bit kin we move afore dayloight."

"Oh—" began Mrs. Ward, in a treble scream, as O'Brady removed the gag from her mouth.

"Will yez? Whist now, er must I troy ther blandishments ag'in on yez?"

He cut short the scream before it had risen into a howl by the sudden application of his thumb and forefinger to her neck, and Mrs. Ward found that O'Brady could be as arbitrary as the road-agents, and was fairly frightened into a semblance of stoicism.

"Oi'm a badd man, Mrs. Ward, when you git me riz, an' ef ye know phat's good fur yez you'll kape quiet phile Oi thry to plan me way out er in."

But Jack O'Brady's brains failed to respond to his cudgeling, and the only idea that possessed him was that if he went straight forward he might possibly blunder into path number three, and having the password, he could easily obtain entrance to the stronghold, which he did not doubt was somewhere in the vicinity.

"Sure, an' ef Oi hadn't saved ther wrong woman it's little would Oi be sthandin' here. But it's safe yez are ontill mornin', so I guess ye

may stay here wid the horse fur kimpany, whole Oi go s'arch fur ther young leddy. There's a pint gained so far anyhow."

"Oh, take me to her, take me to her! For heaven's sake don't leave me alone here in the darkness! I would sooner have remained with the robbers. Please, Mr. O'Brady, don't desert me!"

She remembered the strength of his thumb, and confined her entreaties to stage whispers at the loudest, but she accompanied them with a pitiful wringing of hands, and finally plunged down upon her knees before the stage-driver.

He remained obdurate, however, and with a last admonition to be silent and not to move lest he might not be able to find her again, O'Brady tied his horse to a convenient bough, and strode away in search of path number three and Mira.

For a few moments Mrs. Ward was despairingly silent, her knees glued to the ground. Then she rose up quietly, and looking around to fix her bearings, started off as well as she could on the trail of the departed O'Brady.

CHAPTER XXV.

ALONE ON A LEDGE.

THERE was no bravado in the act of Mira. She was exhausted by excitement and nature demanded rest. When she closed her eyes she almost instantly fell asleep.

Lieutenant Vera, on the contrary, was not tired, and for a time was very wide awake; but gradually her thoughts became a confused blur and she drifted into dreamland.

She had taken her position near the doorway, not so much, perhaps, to guard against any intrusion as to prevent any possibility of escape. There seemed no way for the prisoner to get out except by stepping over her and that attempt would hardly be made since the lightest step would reach Vera's ear, resting so closely to the floor.

The hours drifted by, and it was nearer to dawn than midnight when Mira suddenly opened her eyes and then sat bolt upright and wide awake.

It seemed to her that she had heard a sound, first, that had awakened her, and then seen a faint rustle of the curtains that draped the walls of the room. Perhaps they had been parted but a moment before.

No mistake was there in that, for while she looked the curtain was drawn aside just at the foot of her bed, and a man stepped into the room.

He was undoubtedly one of the road-agents, since he was dressed as they had been, and over his face was a black mask such as they had worn. Surprise held Mira dumb; but in the feeble glimmer of light the intruder could see but little of her features since they were in the shade, and he seemed quite as much surprised himself.

"Come on!" he exclaimed in a sharp whisper, and sprung at her like a panther, while at his back appeared two more masked men.

"Yonder chest, snatch it!" said the leader as he caught up Mira, and with one bound disappeared once more behind the curtains just as two shots sounded thunderously loud in the cave-like apartment.

Vera had sprung to her feet, a revolver in each hand, and swinging them to a level had pulled the triggers. As Mira was hurried from the room she had a glimpse of two men, masked like her captor falling with outstretched hands. Then the curtain fell behind her and she was borne away like a feather in the arms of her captor, who uttered but one brief warning:

"Silence, or death!"

What it all meant was a mystery, to the girl. She would have struggled loose if she could; but found that her two wrists were pinioned in one hand as though clamped in a vise, while the arm that upheld her was as firm as marble.

Then, in spite of the threats, she thought of screaming; but one thought restrained her. It was possible, it was even more than likely, that this man was a friend, who was risking everything to effect her rescue. Her case could hardly be worse, while a cry might insure pursuit. She remembered the dropping men, with the outstretched arms, and was silent. If weapons were turned on this man who was bearing her away the bullets might not respect her. She had seen what Vera was capable of, and had no reason to suppose that her heart would be any softer for one of her own sex.

There were several twists and turns made, with a readiness that showed thorough ac-

quaintance with the passageways through which the flight was made. Once, indeed, the man halted long enough to noose a short rope about her waist, and then she was forced upon her knees.

"Crawl," said the man, and as she obeyed she heard the sound of a bowlder pulled into the aperture behind them, effectually closing the narrow path.

A little later they emerged from the rocks, coming out upon a narrow shelf.

Still they were in darkness, for at this hour the high wall of the canyon effectually shut out the moonlight. At her feet yawned a seeming abyss, black and unfathomable.

Her captor loosened his hold now. No need to bruise the round soft wrists, since, were she left to her own devices, she would not have known which way to turn when he had finished placing in the aperture from whence they had crept the huge stone over which he was bending.

The man straightened himself up and stretched out his arms, as though they had been severely tried by his task.

They had, for the rock weighed well-nigh half a ton.

Blood and brain could stand it no longer. In spite of all her courage Mira gave way. Terror seized her; this man who had stolen her from the outlaws and brought her to the brink was no friend, but a foe. She clasped her hands wildly and fell down before him.

"In mercy's name who are you? If you are not a friend, why have you brought me hither? For Heaven's sake relieve my suspense for I can bear no more!"

Then the man straightened himself up before her. He was brawny, towering, immense.

"Ha, ha!"

He laughed with a hearse but bitter laugh that was full, too, of brutal exultation.

"A friend! Yer right; but, gal, I ain't your friend. I'm yer foe. Oh, they all tramped on me because they knew I was slow on the shute; but I'll twist on 'em yet till their eyes drop out. Calligan an' all on 'em crawled right over me, but I'll hold 'em level at last. It was money, too, we were after, an' we missed it, but I've got you, an' ther first thing Blue Tank'll see in ther mornin' is ther gal what saved ther man what killed my old pard, Gid Walsh, hanging to ther nearest tree, with her face black and her tongue out. Oh, I'm a friend; but that's the kind ov a friend I be."

She could not understand the half of what he said, and yet enough of it was plain. Madman or not, his terrible intent was certain.

Yet it was worth her while to make one more trial.

"There must be some terrible mistake. Surely you would not slaughter an innocent girl. Your captain pledged his word for my safety; that strange girl, who seems in authority, vowed I should be safe. I am worth five thousand dollars to them. Listen. I have more money belonging to me than I can spend in a lifetime. I will bribe you well. Five thousand dollars more will I give to you if you will move away that stone and let me go back to the outlaws."

"Five thousand dollars! Ha! ha! What would I do with your gold? What good would it do me, the boss of charcoal camp? Go on, gal, I like ter hear yer purty lips pleadin', an' I'd keep yer hyar till mornin', jist ter see yer face grow whiter an' whiter; but I've got other work to do, work that will make these hyar hands red fur all ther grime that's on 'em. No! Not fur ten times five thousand!"

"Oh, yer needn't look 'round and quiver back. Go five foot either way, an' it's over ther ledge, five hundred foot down. I'm runnin' my risks with you. If the rope breaks, ther'll be two corpses lyin' mashed an' battered by the wall of ther kenyon."

He stooped as he spoke, and stretched out his hand. A stout drill, or a short iron crowbar, was let into the rock, and around it was a rope, its bight hitched over the iron, and its two ends hanging from either side, down into the chasm. He loosened the rope so that it would slide freely. He was mad indeed, but full of method.

At that minute Mira sprung at him with outstretched arms. He stumbled, fell; caught one side of the rope, and shot downward into the chasm; while the girl lay senseless on the ledge.

CHAPTER XXVI.

COLONEL JEHU BREAKS A TRUCE.

As the members of the committee had a favor to ask of Major Calligan they were not at all loth to make his acquaintance, though under other circumstances they might have hesitated about putting themselves in close communion with so desperate and reckless a man.

It took some little time, however, to introduce their business, for the major, though by no means forgetting them, seemed a great deal more interested in Colonel Jehu. Though they repaired to what was by courtesy called a private room, and seated themselves in a very businesslike way, there were so many old-time reminiscences to be discussed that it began to seem as though they were to hear the complete history of the two men's lives, and by their own showing they had been far from sanctimonious.

But by dint of perseverance the Honorable Beniah succeeded in getting the subject of their troubles fairly started; and then they could no longer complain of want of interest, though when pinned down to amounts the major shook his head somewhat dubiously.

"Five thousand is a slashin' av money, me b'yes," he said, in a reflective way. "Oi had tin in the Thrust an' Loan, but that's did gone bustid. Oi have slathers av shtock an' interist in more mines than yez kin shake a shtick at, but divil a five thousand kin I put me finger on, an' it's too late to thry the pull av ther pasteboards. Besides, the charcoal men, whin they took ther town, closed up the banks in freight. But phat I have is at yer service; an', be sure, phat Oirishman wouldn't give his last cint for lovely woman?"

"What then are we to do?" asked Vanclyde, almost in despair.

"Sure, airly in the mornin' Oi'll thry a tourn at Faro Brown's bank, an' if I can't dhraw enough to make up ther detishency Oi'll go 'long wid yez an' give 'em my note. Bliss yer sows they know me; an' if they didn't do ther shquare thing it's moighty soon they'd be saltid down."

"But did it never strike you, major, that it was your duty to society to try the operation anyway?"

"Thanks fur the same suggistion, but it's a care Oi have fur the willfare av Blue Tank, an' thim same road-agints is a sign av prosperity an' civilization. Go to shlope now wid an aisy heart. It's meself that'll fix it, wan way wid anither."

"You can bet high he will," interposed the colonel. "Let him alone to get ahead of the thieves. He's the kind to set to catch them—I know him of old. And I'll go along to see fair play. But what do you think has become of the coach and driver?"

"That is what bothers us. We hoped to have heard before this, since several men, under the leadership of a man named White, had agreed to start in search, and as I saw nothing of them again the supposition is that they are off on the trail."

"Oh, yes. Old Dave, 'the war-horse of the Mohaves,' He's a solid old man to tie to, and I reckon he'll bring in news before morning. Well, if the worst comes to the worst count me in, though I'd give a dollar to know what became of the young cuss that started the frolic."

"Sure, an' he's shloped, no doubt, fur the Monkeyunc mountains. To bed wid yez all, an' O'll loight out fur me ranch so ez to be riddy fur Tom airly in the mornin'."

It seemed a dubious chance, but nothing better had been suggested. So Roger Vanclyde was tolerably content, and the party broke up.

At an early hour the next morning all hands were astir and the first intelligence that greeted them was that Old Dave White had brought in the coach, and teams minus one horse, but had been unable to find the driver.

The coach was there, at the stable, none the worse for wear; but if there had ever been ten thousand dollars' worth of property in it it was empty enough now. As O'Brady had the reputation of being not only a brave but a thoroughly honest man the probabilities were that the agents had stopped the coach, and probably killed him while he was attempting to defend it.

Major Calligan now seemed to be their

best hope; for those who knew the ways of the bandits best insisted that their first move should be to ransom Mira. After that, if they wanted to get even they could safely equip a little army.

"Nobody'll be found, anyway—there never is, an' it's been tried a dozen times," said Cairnes, consolingly. "But all the same there's no telling what they would do if they had their fingers on a friend of the party that was hunting them. I wouldn't prezactly go out there alone; but jist tie on to ther major, an' ther fat feller that come in on ther stage last night, an' they'll bring you through hunky dory."

So certain little formulas in the shape of drafts and notes were arranged, and then Roger Vanclyde, attended by the two representatives of the Foreign Contingent, rode out, followed by the best wishes of Blue Tank, which, upon their departure, proceeded to mind its own business.

Not very long afterward several other parties slipped out of town, at short intervals, and in a quiet way. They had their own affairs to attend to, also, and the objective point of one at least was the charcoal camp.

As the major was well acquainted with the trails and traces around Blue Tank it would have been strange if he had not been able to recognize the spot that had been named for the rendezvous. Without hesitation he led the way directly thither, and just before sundown they sighted the spot.

It was not hard to see why this was the place chosen for meeting.

From the mountains behind a view could be had of the surrounding country so that it would be impossible for any force to be brought across the open ground without its being seen, and in every direction lines of retreat were open in case such a force made its appearance.

It was a spot, too, that would have possessed a wonderful interest for antiquarians; but the men of Blue Tank were entirely too practical for such nonsense. As they had found no traces of gold or silver in the neighborhood they had let it severely alone.

At the edge of this little clearing the three halted.

"Yinder is ther p'int, forninst ther big hape av rocks," said the major, with a wave of his hand. "Kape yer eye thar."

As if in answer three forms stepped out from their concealment behind or beside the ruin of rocks, and advanced a few paces. Vanclyde was certain that he caught sight of the flutter of feminine garments.

"Come," he said. "They are waiting for us, and I do believe they intend to act honestly with us."

"Be shure they does," answered the major; and as one man the three advanced.

At the motion, however, the three at the ruins held up each a hand, and made a gesture that called a halt.

"Begorra, an' it's not napping they will be caught. See, that spalpeen howlds up his arrum. They mane wan av us at a toim; an' es I know ther nature of ther baste better it's meself thet hed better go."

Scarcely waiting to receive the unwilling assent of Vanclyde the little major pushed forward, seemingly without any fear of what might be before him.

The three awaited him, until he came quite near. Then Vanclyde saw a slender, graceful figure advance, a figure that he was almost certain belonged to Mira, and his heart began to beat hard with anticipation. He was just really beginning to know how dear this niece was to him. Yet in the cares of everyday life he had oftentimes considered her very much of a nuisance.

He was so certain that it was she, and that their trouble was at an end, that he could hardly restrain himself from rushing forward to clasp her in his arms. He was more than surprised when, at the end of what seemed a good deal of earnest conversation, Calligan turned away, coming back hastily and alone.

Roger Vanclyde was so excited that he did not notice the troubled look on the usually impudent face of the major.

"How! What is it?" he exclaimed. "Do they not trust us, or can you not satisfy their demands? Why did you not bring Mira back?"

"Faith, an' it's in thruble they are fer she's not with thim at all. Be ther powers

but it's a strange story they till. They've lost her."

"Lost her?"

Vanclyde could only gasp out those words and then stare in dazed terror at his companions.

"Yis. It's stolen she is; but the villains swear to foind her, an' I'll give bond they'll do the'r livil best."

"But what can you mean? Is she not with them? That woman—who then was she?"

"Shure, she's not Miss Miry, but wan av ther agints, hersilf; an' much consarned she is—if her little fingers ain't in ther pie."

He was interrupted in his explanation by the noise of a shout.

Colonel Jehu had spurred his horse forward and was riding at a gallop, straight toward the woman, who was, of course, Lieutenant Vera.

She saw the sudden movement and for a time lingered, uncertain whether she should meet him, and at her back several men appeared, with cocked and leveled pistols.

"Howld on, ye divel, or Oi'll shute! Would yez br'ake a thruce in that way?" shouted Major Calligan, and he threw up his revolvers, which fortunately were the first weapons that came handy.

But Lieutenant Vera's men had already withdrawn, and now she sprung back out of sight. Before Colonel Jehu had covered half the distance that had severed them she was speeding away like an arrow, her sure-footed steed devouring the ground at a pace that seemed to defy pursuit.

Colonel Jehu caught the distant flutter of her garments, and refused to despair. No jockey could have handled his horse better. He went like a whirlwind.

Behind him thundered the little major; while Roger Vanclyde was left alone at the edge of the opening, with the evening shades gathering darker and darker around him. He waited a long while, and heard the report of several pistol-shots in the distance, but no one came. At last he turned and slowly made his way back toward Blue Tank.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A CRAVEN SHOT.

"Be easy," whispered Bart Brandon, as he darted away, steadying the form of the much hunted Vance. "I know something of these regions, and can guess more, I'll take you out of the range of the charcoal men, good enough. You're better than two or three dead men; but keep quiet, and make no trouble."

With this caution Brandon urged his mustang onward, and threaded the dim path that led away through the tangled snarl of the mesquites.

"Fortune favored them. Several times at random they turned aside to follow some still more slender trail, and at last, hearing nothing of their pursuers, they ventured to halt. Vance was growing stronger every moment, in spite of the wearisome ride.

When they had taken a short breathing spell, and listened in vain for some sound that might indicate the approach of the Charcoal men, Bart Brandon spoke:

"What in heaven's name are you doing here, Herbert Vance? Don't you know that you are in the deadliest danger?"

"If I don't know it I ought to. If I didn't have two or three wonderfully strong hints, then I don't know such things when I see them. But who are you? I've heard your voice somewhere, I'll swear; but I don't recollect your face."

"Are you sure of that?" asked the other earnestly.

"How do you suppose I can remember every man I've ever met? It would take me up among the millions. But they all drop to me sure enough, and there are mighty few of them friends, somehow. I don't see how it comes that you happen to be a friend. What good turn did I ever do you?"

"None at all; and I'm not certain but what, a great many years ago, you did me one of the worst wrongs you could have done me. If, after that, you don't recognize me we'll let it go. For the sake of another, whom you certainly wronged a great deal more than you did me, I'm going to see you out of this scrape if it can be done. I'll put you fair and square on the trail for Prescott,

and then I've got to get back to Blue Tank as fast as I can."

"Say, old man, you're talking Greek to me. Who is the other party? Mention some names, can't you? I'm up to my ears in the dark."

"For the sake, then, of Mira Coyle."

"Mira Coyle—and who are you?"

"Are you crazy, or are you shamming for some infernal end? Here! Do you pretend to say that you don't know me?"

The suppositious Bart Brandon dashed off his sombrero and threw aside a set of heavy false whiskers, and the young, handsome face of Ward Farrar was revealed.

"Do you dare to say, Herbert Vance, that you don't know me now?"

There was moonlight in the glade, and every line of the two faces was plainly to be seen, but still Vance hesitated.

"Not know Ward Farrar! Then you are a lie and a sham! You are not Herbert Vance."

"Hold on, hold on!" exclaimed Vance, as the other, in some excitement, seized him by the shoulder, and stooping, gazed earnestly into his face.

"Don't you know when a man gets out here it's sometimes convenient to forget as much as he can of his past life? I've got a few things on my mind that I don't want to remember, and I'm not sure but what you're hitting at one of them now."

"Infernal scoundrel that you are! I suppose that you are telling the truth, and yet I doubt you. Your face is the face of Herbert Vance: but there is something lacking. I do not know what to believe."

"Except that I was once the husband of Mira Coyle. I think I understand the case now. The fair young damsel is still alive, and a young man of your size and weight has a more than seemly interest in her. Ward Farrar! Why, bless my soul! You were one of the witnesses of the marriage."

Farrar looked at him in amazement now. The coolness of this young man quite took away his breath.

And it was hard to tell if this remembrance had not just come to him. He spoke suddenly, and as though well pleased with himself for remembering. Seeing that Farrar had nothing to say, he added:

"Yes, old man, I know you now, and all that nonsense at Johnstown, and much obliged am I to you for your trouble, past and present. I suppose you're honest enough in your advice about falling back on Prescott; but it can't be done. When the roughs were going for my scalp, and I didn't know what was to happen next, I put some papers in the hands of a man in Blue Tank, and I've got to see him and get them again. He said he was white, and the man who said that must either show the color, or turn his toes up. This is a good enough place to lay low in for a little, but back I'm going."

"No, no!" exclaimed Farrar, vehemently. "After all the risk and trouble, for heaven's sake stay where you are. I will bring your papers to you."

"Minus a certain marriage certificate. Thank you for your trouble, and I guess for my life, too; but if you'll lie by me till morning, I'll paddle my own canoe. I'm not given to trusting in poor human nature when there's a hundred thousand depending on it."

"And you'd sooner lose your life, and make a woman whose happiness you have already wrecked, miserable for years! Don't know that if you're taken, in daylight or you dark, they'll hang you?"

"Oh, that flurry will be over soon. I put a knife in a couple of men but it was that or die. Self-defense lays over everything, and a square jury anywhere would turn me loose."

They got hold of the wrong man, and that was all there was of it. I never killed this Gid Walsh they were talking about."

"If you didn't, who did? He lived long enough to say so. And whether you did or not they are on the scent now and they will know what I know—that Herbert Vance and Captain Vane of the road-agent gang are one and the same."

Vance chewed thoughtfully at a little twig that he held between his teeth. Then he looked up with a twinkle in his eyes.

"For a stranger in the camp I'll admit you know too infernal much; but you're mistaken now. I can prove that I haven't been

around Blue Tank a week, and I can trace my way straight back to 'Frisco. There are good men at every station that can swear to me. Oh, I thought of all that, and I have it all down fine. No road-agent have I ever been; but an honest speculator, that has salted down considerable of the glittering oro, that I may or may not lose if I don't find the big man in boots."

There was a bantering tone about the man that ground horribly upon the nerves of Ward Farrar. The hidden meaning in it was enough to set him wild. It said, Thank you, my friend, you have been honest enough to save me, and yet it will cut you to the quick. You always were a fool.

He answered slowly and with some effort:

"Take care that you do not prove too much. That would be worse than proving nothing at all. There is a man, Harvey Sloat, on your track. He has wealth and brains, and he means to crush you. Better to take my advice. If, henceforth, the world should consider you dead, you would have a better chance to continue living. Change your name, and start fresh. A live miner is better than a dead outlaw."

"You think so. There is something in that. You might console the widow and administer on my estate. As for Sloat, he was an old-time partner, and would give rocks to know that I was dead and he was alone in the Black Jack. Well, go back and swear I'm dead, and I'll consider the question at leisure."

Farrar still looked dubiously at the man.

"I will—and for the present will keep my suspicions to myself. If you will not take my advice, good-by. I've run risk enough already."

As he spoke Farrar donned once more his false whiskers, drew his hat down over his brow, and slowly mounting his mustang turned away.

As he did so Vance muttered between his clinched teeth:

"Young man you know too awful much."

He stooped, then, and from the inside of his boot-leg drew a small revolver that had been hidden there, and holding it straight for Ward Farrar's back pulled the trigger.

At the sound of the report the mustang bounded violently forward, while his rider, swaying for a moment, fell heavily forward. As the horse dashed out of sight the man was lying upon his neck, around which his arms were convulsively clasped, while from the shadow of the mesquites near by there arose a cry of surprise, which reached the ears of Herbert Vance.

"Mad as ever," he muttered, "though it may have been life or death. Curses on my folly, I dare not venture into Blue Tank until I know that it was a sure shot; and meantime I may have stirred up the charcoal fiends. I must take to my heels, yet wait!"

His waiting was not inaction, for while he was waiting he sprung away into the darkness and left the little glade bare and empty in the moonlight.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RESULT OF O'BRADY'S STRATEGY.

WHEN Vera, at the time of Mira's abduction, had discharged her revolvers at the two upon whom her eyes first rested, and saw that they had dropped, she cast a hasty glance at the bed upon which the girl had been resting, and for the first time became aware that it was vacant.

Up to this moment she had a blurred idea that it was a treacherous attempt to rob the chest of treasure; but now it seemed something more. As she looked around in a dazed way two or three men alarmed by the noise of the shots came hurriedly to the spot.

"Quick, search the room! There is treachery somewhere. The prisoner is gone and yonder two would have robbed us of our spoils. Here, if they did not pass you this way they must have gone. They are in the next room."

She did not altogether trust her men but watched them with an eagle glance and with her fingers on the triggers of her pistols while she bounded to the hangings and thrust them aside, at the very point where Mira had disappeared.

"Quick! Light yonder lantern and come on."

The beams of the dark-lantern shot before them into the darkness, and showed that the

room beyond was void of any living tenant. They showed, also, an opening hitherto unsuspected. The room was not a *cul-de-sac*—it was a passageway to some unknown regions beyond and whoever had gone that way had been in too great haste to close the way behind him.

"This way, this way!" cried Vera, as she darted through the second opening. "I can guess where this leads."

Her guess, however, brought her out at the very spot, almost, where a sentinel stood, a man that was to be trusted, and he averred no man had passed him going out, and was full of wonder in regard to the muffled sounds of firing that he had heard. Yet here, in someway, the exit must have been made and down the several steep paths she sent her men while back through the passage she went, in search of a solution of the mystery. Though she turned the bright disk from her lantern this way and that no possible way of escape appeared.

"The men!" she exclaimed. "Let me see them. From their faces I can judge who the other traitor may be."

In haste she sought her lair once more.

The one man lay just where he had dropped to her shot, but the other, it seemed to her, had moved somewhat. His head now lay where his feet had been.

From the face of the first she tore the black mask and turned the glare of her lantern full upon it.

It was unknown.

"Ah!"

Here was a revelation.

Robbers in a den of robbers. The tables had been turned with a vengeance. The secrets of the cliff house were secrets no longer.

Hastily Vera turned to the second.

He looked even less like a road-agent than his comrade. He lay flat on his back, with his arms stretched out on either side. When she wrenched away the mask from his face the force of the effort lifted his head from the ground; when the fastenings broke the head fell back with a resounding whack which brought a suppressed "ouch!" from the lips of the corpse. At the same time Vera detected a movement of the lower jaw, which suddenly dropped, disclosing a cavernous mouth, while the eyelids, with an evident effort, were held tightly closed.

Vera gave a start, and then smiled. Along the top of this man's head she could detect a slight furrow, where her ball had plowed its way. He was no more dead than she was.

"A good-looking fellow he is," said Vera, aloud. "A pity it is to scalp him, but I have sworn to do it. The wolves will hardly know the difference by the time he strikes the bottom of the canyon. First a ball through his heart, and then—"

There was the sharp clicking of a revolver lock, and the eyes were not quite so tightly closed. Between the partly opened lids the man could see the barrel being brought in line with his breast and could stand it no longer.

"Howld on, howld on! Would yez kill a did mon intoirely? It's not a corrupse I am at all, at all; but John O'Brady, thit's got hisself in a schrape lookin' after Miss Miry."

And John O'Brady, whose wits had been completely muddled by the wound upon his head, now sat bolt upright, facing the girl lieutenant, who was not at all surprised at the sudden transformation.

"Now tell the truth, and quickly. Who were your companions; and what have they done with the girl who was my guest?"

"Sorra wan av me knows. Sure I'm Jack O'Brady, which drove ther stage whin ther agints gobbled up ther darlint. So as I wor throyin' ter foind her, down below in ther darruk two spalpeens fill fowl av me, an' consthrained me to kim along wid thim."

"And how did you get in?"

"Sure we hed the password, Owls. An' ther big wan wor to see to ther gurrul—be ther same token he knew the way bist; an' me an' the ither wor to walk off wid the box. It's bad kimpany I wor in but you wouldn't shute a mon twict did fur that?"

Whether O'Brady had any further schemes in his head or not this was all that could be got out of him, and it was hard to tell whether he was or was not terribly frightened. As he kept quiet concerning his adventure

with the captain, and never once mentioned Mrs. Ward, there was an unexplained mystery about his story that Vera finally decided it was useless to attempt to clear up until the arrival of the captain himself. O'Brady was put under guard and she devoted the time to an unsuccessful prosecution of the search for Mira. This was the reason why she appeared at the rendezvous without the girl-hostage; and unable to say what had become of her.

And all this finishes the explanation why Mr. Vanclyde went back disconsolately to Blue Tank without his niece, determined on doing now what, for fear of possible danger he had not done before—raise an army and inaugurate a military campaign.

As he entered the town he became aware that something had caused a ripple of excitement; and at the Palace he thanked his lucky stars for what seemed a stroke of great good fortune. A young lieutenant of cavalry was at the hotel and near by the town a platoon of cavalry had gone into camp. The troops were at his service, the campaign might begin at once, for the lieutenant had been ordered here to look after the outlaws, whose depredations had become too audacious to be longer overlooked.

The appearance of Vanclyde added to the interest of affairs, since he came alone.

The brief story that he had to tell explained nothing and the majority of those who heard it were inclined to believe that the two lost lights of the Foreign Contingent had fallen in an ill-advised attack upon the agents.

In addition, General Sloat was reported missing. He had quietly stepped out of the Palace, without saying a word to any one; and it was likely that he too was seeking if indeed he had not found the spot where the woodbine was twining. If any more of the new-comers were lost no one reported them since they had not been missed.

The Honorable Beniah was there: and not at all concerned.

"Bad work, bad work," he said to his confrere. "But, between us, Sloat was a rascal. Something queer about it all. You should have had me along to-day; go with you to-morrow and put it on a business footing. Bad thing to mix in the soldiers, but might be worse. I'll look and see. Maybe I can learn something about contracts. Money in them. Make enough to buy Mira out, eh? Philanthropy is good, and revolvers are good; but it takes business to get out of such a scrape after all."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A JEALOUS LOVER.

COLONEL JEHU was a large man, and had been called the fat man, though really he was all muscle and bone. One would have supposed that in a race against two such light weights as Lieutenant Vera on the one hand and the jaunty major on the other he would have stood no chance whatever.

But he was well mounted, and before he had gone many hundred yards he showed his ability to get out of his horse all that was in it. Though Lieutenant Vera tore away at a tremendous rate he held his own, keeping his eyes steadily fixed on the flitting form ahead of him, and never once turning his head or seeming to mind the cries of the major behind, who, with revolver in hand hurled after him threats that were savage enough to dam a river or stop the course of any average avalanche. Once out of hearing of Roger Vanclyde, however, Calligan ceased his wordy efforts, and settled down to solid work, a smile wreathing his lips as he saw that after the first burst of speed, he was perceptibly gaining.

Then his horse made a misstep, blundered and fell, while the major shot forward through the air as though discharged from a catapult. For a few moments at least he was out of the pursuit.

It is likely that Colonel Jehu saw or heard nothing of the mishap. At that moment he was standing in his stirrups to obtain a better view of the course before him, and the country that had a downward trend to his left.

Vera had just vanished, though he could hear hoof-beats in the distance, and it would not have been hard to follow the trail that she had taken. Instead the colonel bore suddenly to the left. He almost seemed to have

abandoned pursuit, since he had eyes now only for his downward course, over the broken country before him.

An hour later and he was as steadily working his way upward, though the mad race had subsided into a steady gallop—which finally changed to a walk as he forced his way through a patch of thickly-woven shrubbery.

Then he halted.

Before him lay a narrow trail, beyond which rose a steep wall of rock. If he had known the ground ever so much better than he did, he could not have chosen a better place for an ambush, provided this was the route by which Vera was to come.

The moonlight sifted right down into the trail before him. Leaving his horse in the shadow, with the bridle reins cast over its head to hang loose, he stooped down, and moving slowly, narrowly examined the roadway.

The examination seemed to satisfy him. He arose, folded his arms, and, stepping a pace or two further, once more in the shadow, leaned against the rocky wall, waiting.

He had not long to wait.

Five minutes had not passed when he heard some one approaching. It was Vera, riding at a walk, the reins resting loosely in her listless hands, her head bowed down in thought.

Suddenly her horse started, recalling her to outside life, and as she looked up Colonel Jehu stepped out into the bridle-path before her.

"No, no, little woman," he exclaimed, as he saw her slender fingers close suddenly over the butts of her pistols. "Whatever foolishness there is between us, don't wake up the devil of shooting in me. I've held my hand of late, and hard enough work it was, but if I forgot myself for a breath you'd never touch irons again."

"Stand aside then, and let me pass, whoever you may be. I never ask twice. If once does not answer I clear the way."

At first glance she recognized her pursuer of an hour ago, and the sight startled her more than would have three new foes. She spoke bravely; and yet her hands dropped away from her weapons.

"Try it," said the man, with a sneer. "I know your skill; but fortunately you know mine. Do you suppose there is the person living, man or woman, that can get a shot at me at this distance, with me watching? When I die that way it will be suicide."

"Well?"

"Well, I am not tired of living."

"I wonder at that; I am. Yet I would not advise you to trust your eye and hand too far. I know another at least as quick."

"That remains to be tried. My business is with him first, if he lives; afterward with you."

"And why afterward?"

"Because I have some little soul left yet, and I would save the victim to the last."

"The victim?"

"Yes, the victim. What else can I call you but the victim of this man, who has a score of names, and doubtless a wife for every name? Two of them are on the way now to greet him—though I suspect you have slain one of them already in your jealous fury. Oh, you may look daggers, or throw them either. I know the whole story of how you nursed this man Vane through what the Vigilantes had thought would be his last sickness. It took me a good while to ferret it out, and find where he had hidden you, but I did, and I am here to avenge his victim and then slay her."

"Victim you said?"

Vera had lightly slidden from her horse to the ground. As she spoke she came forward until she stood facing the man at a distance of not two paces.

"I did."

The defiant look of the man changed to one of sullenness; his eyes dropped apparently, and yet covered her with their burning gaze.

"Take that back."

Her voice rung out on the night air, sharp yet musical as the notes of a bugle. Her outstretched finger nearly touched him, and it seemed like a point of steel.

"I take nothing back. You like the truth, and you have it, harsh as it sounds. Girl alive, what is there for me to take back?"

If I ate my words a thousand times here would be the fact staring you in the face.

"Why, confound you, whoever you may be, am I the woman to be a victim? Say anything but that and I could forgive it—that I will not. Take it back I say, or I swear that from this night there shall be war between us, war to the death."

"I may be wrong," answered the colonel, slowly. "You'd make an archangel believe he'd told a lie. And yet it gives me a little hope. What do you care what I say or think? If my words, only maddened you you'd either draw, or go away and wait for a better chance, when you had the drop on me. Yes. By heavens! I'll take it back, and that is more than ever I did for fear or favor, to any man living."

"It is well," said Vera slowly. "And yet it would have been better not said at all."

"Or said in a different way. Perhaps if I'd go for the victim first I wouldn't be far wrong, and I wouldn't hit you either."

"Hold! Your retraction is as bad as the first insult. Why must one or the other of the persons be a dupe? Am I a fool, or a drivel? Away with you! Let me pass, I have nothing more to say."

"Yes, but you have. A word or two I want. Where is this girl in quest of whom we are supposed to have come out? What object was there in taking her? And how comes it that this Vane was in such danger from the charcoal men who should have been his friends? And how comes it that you were at the rendezvous at the mines and not he? Was he hung in fact last night? or was he afraid to face the man he knew he had injured? or is he so charmed with his old time wife that he sends you out on his dangerous work, to tell his own lies while he lingers at her feet? I don't ask you to give your pards away, yet answer me such of these questions as you can."

He was very much in earnest, and Vera listened to him patiently to the end.

Then she burst into a ringing laugh.

"I heard a man once say that of all fools a jealous fool was the worst; I believe him now. Honestly! You have been in the business yourself, do you expect me to answer your questions?"

"No. Why should you?"

"Sulky, eh? Well, just to show you how little you know about a woman, I will—if I can remember them. In the first place I know no more than you do where the girl is. I tell you she was stolen away, and unless she could pass through the solid rock I have no idea where she went to. My men are looking for her now."

"Of course Captain Vane could not have taken her?"

The colonel spoke with a sneer. It seemed to him that if the rest of her answers were as guileless as this he would not get much information.

"No, he could not. He first followed the charcoal-burners; and then went to Blue Tank. A force of soldiers coming to weed us out requires some watching for. No doubt you came to warn us of their approach. That would be the act of a man and a brother. I have seen him since, and he was as much puzzled as I. He will find her if you and I cannot."

Under all the sarcasm of her tone there lurked a question which he noted but did not answer. Had he or had he not anything to do with the coming troops?

"You want to know why he took the girl at all; have you never, on the spur of the moment, been guilty of a bit of reckless bravado. It was not the intention to molest the stage at all. The attack at the ford was an unwarrantable mistake. Then chance threw them so temptingly in the road that the rest followed. Vane was in no danger from the charcoal men, as you very well know."

"Ah, there you are mistaken. They were hanging him, high as Haman, Vane or Vance. It is all the same, Herbert Vance is his name. By this time he should have told you. You needn't lift your eyebrows. Facts are stubborn things."

"So you have said before; but, Varley Vane was not hung last night, he has no knowledge of ever having wronged you, and as for this story of his old-time wife, I don't believe a word of it."

"Then read this. I had some more papers

that once belonged to him but they robbed me of them. It makes no difference. I would have saved him from the rope if I could—but only because I have sworn to shoot him myself."

He placed in her hand a well-creased document, yellow with age and handling.

She held it gingerly, and hesitated to look at it, though the moon gave sufficient light to at least show its nature.

"Read it, read it," he urged. "Then call me a jealous fool, if you will; but I reckon there will be a pair of them. And she is coming here to hunt him up."

"I guess not!"

It was wonderful to hear how lightly the woman, who could be so stern and cruel, could laugh.

"This was one of the papers that was stolen from him when they wanted to hang him at Ariavaca—if it is his. I had as much as I wanted to do to save him without looking after his paraphernalia. Then, when they tried to hang me, at Prescott he returned the compliment."

"To hang you! Gracious Heaven! for what?"

"Oh, I was dealing faro for the legislature, and one of the sports who made the laws grew too familiar and I had to shoot him. I forgot I was in a civilized community. Look! Here is a little love-tap they gave me."

She pushed up the loose sleeve of her velvet tunic and bent forward. He could see the long white cicatrice of a ghastly wound.

"They shot straight, there, if was at a woman—and then Vane and a partner sailed in. A desperate time of it we had, but we swept the street, and after that there wasn't much room for me anywhere, so I turned hermit, and I've been helping run the road-agent business according to the best of my humble capacity. But, confound them, if they had let us alone we would have retired long ago."

"In peace and quietness together?"

"Why not, my friend? What have you been doing all this time? What are you to me—now? Where have you been?"

"In jail," answered the colonel, humbly. "At Chihuahua in jail; from which I escaped not long ago; and of all the charges of sin and slaughter that might have been laid against me of this one I swear I happened to be innocent. I was sick and missed you. When I could not find you I wandered away and was desperate; but I wasn't guilty of that."

"Of what?"

"Of being one who sacked a ranch. It was a vile lie; but I was an American. The wonder, I suppose, was that they did not kill me when they had me at a disadvantage. But let that go. Read the paper and believe."

"Bless your soul I do believe without that; what I want to know is what to do with you. I can't have you killing the best friend I have, and if this story is true more than ever must I be looking for this girl. Yet he cares nothing for her; I'll vouch for that. There is a woman. Well! Let it go. That's not my affair."

"Are you in earnest?"

"Never more so."

"And truly Vane is nothing to you?"

"Nothing."

"Then take me with you. My work at Blue Tank is ended. I must fight from the other side of the lines. I can be a very useful friend just now."

"And you would risk rope and rifle?"

"With you, or for you, since you tell me that you have not forgotten."

"Then follow me. Oaths would be folly and I need hardly remind you that the penalty of treachery is death."

"But first—the end? Can I hope?"

"As much as ever; that seems to satisfy you. But you may have a chance to do some marvelous shooting. Come."

She glided away from his detaining arm and flung herself nimbly on her steed, while he vaulted into his saddle. Cheered by her words of dubious promise he followed her as she led the way up the narrow bridle-path.

CHAPTER XXX.

"YOUR MISERABLE WIFE."

HERBERT VANCE had perhaps his regrets for the brutal cowardice of his shot at Ward Farrar; but they were not of a conscientious

nature. He recognized the fact that he had made a mistake, though it was one of impulse and not of calculation. As he had no idea that there was a spectator when he pulled the trigger he had a regret that if he was to shoot he had not done it sooner, when the result would be certain. Now he had not only the witness, but possibly Farrar to fear. He hastened away to seek hiding; when, but for the noise, he would probably have followed to make sure of his work. He dived into the tangle and snarl of the shrubbery, and was lost to sight and pursuit.

There was one thing that Vance had not counted on. Already he would have been thoroughly bewildered if he had stopped to think; when he had wandered for half an hour longer the truth suddenly dropped down on him that he had lost his way, and that if his life depended on it he could not tell in which direction Blue Tank lay.

When he knew this, he cast himself sullenly down, and while trying to think by what route he had reached the spot he fell fast asleep, nor woke until the morning had far advanced.

He felt stiff, sore and hungry, and in a detestable humor with himself and the rest of the world. Although he was an old enough voyageur to be able to recognize all the edible nuts and roots, and had a revolver with which it was possible to shoot small game, that night he found he preferred the flesh-pots of Blue Tank, and leaving them for a dernier resort.

To find Blue Tank he wanted some recognizable point of departure, and so began to seek for higher ground. He wandered about for a time, and when he was thoroughly wearied found himself in a canyon, whose nearest wall ran up sheer and impracticable.

He looked up and saw the line of the top cutting sharply the cloudless sky.

He looked downward, and saw at the foot a snake-like coil of rope.

How had it come there?

He asked himself the question in some dismay. Excitement and fasting had made him nervous, and it seemed like an ominous token that he should find a rope.

There was no immediate answer to the question; and he began a search which resulted in a find. He looked at the ground and then up at the sky-line of the wall of the canyon.

"I can't believe it, yet it must be true," he muttered. "Some poor devil has fallen over there, that much is certain, for here is where he struck the ground; but that he should be living yet—that I cannot believe. Yet here is where he dragged himself away."

Sure enough, the trail was there, if he could believe the evidences of his own very acute senses.

"But what was he doing?" thought the puzzled young man. "What was the rope for, and why was he fooling around a point of danger? It's worth looking at a little. I don't care about finding the poor devil himself."

He said this when he followed the trail made by Bucket, that looked as though it might have been done by one who painfully dragged himself along. At the same time he halted and looked back and upward.

His eye caught sight of several ledges, and upon the uppermost one, certainly not a hundred feet from the top, he had a glimpse of what seemed to be a human figure, that suddenly straightened itself up.

At the same time he heard a faint scream, that he thought proceeded from a woman's lips.

"Ah, you're there, are you? More of a mystery. If I could see any way of getting at you I don't know but what I could try playing the good Samaritan, though it is a role that never pays. Yet there is no doubt but that she is in trouble. Probably some one trying to rescue her had a tumble. If I should come to her aid she might in turn help me a little. I'll take the rope and prospect. If it comes in my way, well and good."

He retraced his steps, gathered up the coil, which he threw over his shoulder, and then began to look around him once more for a path from the canyon.

His attention, now, was called to that one side.

The woman had disappeared, but he shouted and waved his hat. He thought he

heard a cry in response; but saw nothing more of the form. Remembering that he might bring unpleasant spectators, he did not try again, but went on in what seemed a vain search for a long time.

He cursed his luck for not having taken an opposite direction; but just then he saw the very thing he was searching for. He was a good climber and not yet too much weakened by abstinence. He attacked the wall of the canyon, and steadily won his way upward.

He had in any event been lucky, since he found a spot where there was a little water—collected in a hollow in a rock. There were traces to show that it was an inconstant spring. He drank, was refreshed, and went on, stronger now even than he had hoped to be.

It took some time, but at length he stood above the ledge. There was no trouble about fastening his rope; and having done so he grasped it to guard against accident, and cautiously leaned over to try and get a glimpse of what was beneath.

He could see the outer edge of the ledge for which he was searching, but the greater part was hidden by the overhanging rock; and he could see nothing of the woman though he was certain that she was there.

From where he was the distance down to the ledge did not seem so great, and he could see that the rope reached on below. If there was any person there why did not he or she give some token of life?

He hesitated, undecided about going further in the adventure, but something seemed to draw him on. He gave a last look around at the lonely solitude about him and then, grasping tightly the rope, carefully lowered himself over the brink.

A fall was certain death; but he did not intend to fall. His muscles seemed to have regained their stoutness and he felt sure that he could trust them. Here and there there were knots on the rope that relieved him a little; and occasionally he braced himself against the wall of the canyon. In a short time he had reached the ledge.

As he swung himself backward from the rope and gained a secure footing he heard a faint cry behind him, that seemed one of joyful surprise. As he turned a young girl sprang forward from where, at the extreme end she had been crouching.

Then she halted, and uttered a cry.

"Herbert Vance!" she exclaimed, looking up into his face with an unmistakable terror.

All along she had feared that that this was Bucket, returning for vengeance—yet here was something almost as bad.

Vance looked somewhat puzzled for an instant—then his face cleared.

"At your service. And you are—"

"Mira Coyle," responded the girl, recovering her courage, and looking him steadily in the face.

"Ah, indeed? I would not have known you, however I might have suspected. Then, you are—"

"Your miserable wife!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

FOILED.

VANCE looked at Mira critically.

Her garments were somewhat worn and travel-stained, but they were well fashioned and of the best texture. Her face and figure were full of rare beauty. Her cheeks had a glow of health that the trouble of the last twenty-four hours had not driven away. The misery seemed entirely temporary. Vance smiled, and was satisfied.

"In four or five years most any one can pick out some hours of very intense misery. You look as though you had been having an average life of it, and as you are certain now to get out of this beastly hole, and as you have found at last, your devoted husband, it is to be hoped that your woes are at an end."

"Can you talk thus lightly of the chain that under the law could be broken like a thread; but which rests on my soul like a cable of steel? For a moment of folly I have had a life-time of remorse. Do you think that I will ever recognize you as my husband?"

"And why not, my dear? I assure you that in every way I am a better man than when we were married some years ago in the little town a few miles from the Mohawk."

"Why not? Oh, heavens! Hear the man!"

talk! Why, you fugitive from justice, you villain, you gambler, you thief, you murderer, what woman would live with you, or for you?"

"All a mistake, my dear. Listen to reason. It is true that there was a temporary cloud, years ago, in the East, that compelled my evacuation; but I swear to you that since then I have lived a reasonably moral life. You allude to certain unfounded reports. How you heard them, or if they are in general circulation, I swear to you I know not; but I am neither a murderer, a road-agent or a fugitive from justice!"

"Liar! I myself cut you down from the gallows but last night. I saved your worthless life; and no doubt it will cost me mine own."

"A mistake again—on the part of the people. I thank you most sincerely for what you did, of course, though it was only the part of a dutiful wife. But the roughs of the charcoal camp, blinded by passion, had taken hold of the wrong man. They would have made me suffer for the sins of one who is already dead and buried. Can't you understand that?"

"Scarcely; because in one of your relapses you had the honesty to write me that I should forget you, since you and that rascal were one."

Something like an oath struggled to the lips of Vance. He suppressed it just in time to prevent perfect utterance.

"Was that all I wrote?"

"You know it was not. You went further; and yet was not so honest as to go far enough. You said there was something to explain and refused to explain it, saying that the safest way of all would be to obtain a divorce. Why did you send such a message as that if you were not a villain?"

"Because I was a fool. I had lost money just then, and swore I never would come back to you as a beggar, and I thought I would give you a chance to be free. Yet that rascal, as you call him, dead though he is, is now the curse of my life. Though I can prove my innocence, step by step, Vigilance Committees will wait for no proof. The resemblance is wonderful, and our names are almost inextricably mixed. He is driving me from the country because of our astounding sameness."

"Who, then, was this double? How comes it that there are two men so astonishingly alike? To save yourself I should have supposed that you would long ago have hounded him down."

"I couldn't very well do that, and it was hard to feel the dreary sort of joy that I did on hearing that he was gone. The fact is, he was my twin brother, Egbert Vance."

"Your brother?"

"Yes. Why do you speak in such a tone? Why do you look at me as though I was a wild beast? Can I help the relationship?"

He drew nearer to her as he spoke, and there was a snarl on his lip and in his tone.

"And he is really dead?" continued Mira, disregarding his questions, and standing with flashing eyes and upraised hand.

"He is really dead; and his memory is dying. Rehabilitated in the East, with the fortune that I have garnered and the woman who is as handsome as a dream for my wife, I can smile at the shadow that is lost in the grave. Come! I am here to save you. At last we will be truly joined, and nothing more can part us. Mira, my wife, my darling, trust yourself to me. Here we must linger no longer."

A bewildered look was on the face of the girl. She appeared like one who was staggering toward a great truth.

"Hold! Touch me not! I see the truth. I am not your wife. I am a widow. Wicked though he may have been, the outlaw was better than you. I am not so sure that he was the outlaw, or that you did not slay him that you might live in his place. Back! I defy you! I would sooner sit here with folded arms, to starve than trust to a flight with you. You are worse than my fancy pictured you. I loathe you. Not the criminal; but the man. Whatever the future may bring against you I will protect myself at all hazards."

There could be no mistaking her now; and yet it seemed very strange. What could she have learned in that brief interview which she did not know before? What hidden

trick of tone or manner had awakened this prejudice?

The man could not guess; but at her words all his worst passions seemed to wake.

He drew a step nearer, his eyes gleaming, and his face working.

"By heavens! with all that I have said I do not profess to be a saint. Do not urge me too far. It might serve my purpose as well to be a widower."

"But if one of us is to die here it will not be I. Stand! A step nearer and I fire."

As she spoke the little revolver that was still her companion, flashed out and covered him with a point-blank aim. She was no shivering school-girl to throw up her hands and faint; but a woman whose splendid courage was standing every test.

And test this was, since only her sharp words and quick movement saved her for the moment. He was ready for a spring already; but at the sight of the cocked weapon, and the sound of her ringing voice, he shrunk back. He was not ready to die, and he had not his revolver ready. The girl held the drop.

Still covering him Mira in her turn gave a backward step, and with her left hand caught the dangling rope. It was the only way of escape and yet now, with the issue of life and death joined between them dared either of them risk the ascent?

A smile, forced but scornful, came to the lips of the man as he saw the situation.

"I know you too well to think that you will murder me in cold blood. Yet, when once you are on the rope you will be in my power. Better, then, that we come to terms, of some kind."

"If I bind you here it will be leaving you to starvation and death; yet if I attempt to climb the rope you will shake me into the chasm. Better to slay you at once."

Her courage was not leaving her; yet she spoke with a shiver, for she had just thought of the man who, the night before, she had pushed over the brink.

"A most sage conclusion. And yet not altogether a true one. All that I have to do is to allow you to go on your way. You have swooned when you were lying on this broad ledge, you just shivered when you thought of the yards beneath you. Your strength is unequal to the task that would try the nerve and strength of a strong man. Go. You will relieve the world of your presence as surely as if I put a dagger in your heart."

He was striving to shake her nerves, and thought that he had succeeded, but by an effort she forgot the leader of the charcoal gang.

"Swear to me to leave me to my fate, and I will give you the chance. Better to die there, than live here."

With her head she nodded, first at the canyon and then at Vance.

"I swear to you," he began, and held up his right hand toward heaven as if to record an oath.

At that her hand wavered, the muzzle of her pistol drooped, she no longer had his life at her fingers' ends.

"Ha, ha!" he cried suddenly changing his tone and swinging his left hand, armed with his revolver into line. "Now I hold the drop."

"And I on you!" shouted a voice from above. "Stir hand or foot, save as I tell you, and I drill you through."

Down over the top of the ledge above leaned Ward Farrar, and not a moment too soon had he spoken for there was a hot devil looking out of Vance's eye. He meant to shoot; but now this man above, whose voice he knew, held the game in his own hands and his coming unhinged all of Vance's nerves.

"Put your revolver back in your belt and then up with your hands!"

"Curse you, you have the advantage now, and there's nothing else to do. Two on one is no fair."

True enough; both weapons covered him now; and the only wonder was that he did not drop dead. Either of these two had provocation enough.

"Now stand so," continued Farrar, "while Miss Mira mounts the rope. Move if you dare. Miss Coyle, dare you risk it?"

"It is nothing," responded the girl, cheerily. "I know my strength, I have

tested it thoroughly in the gymnasium, and it will not fail me."

Then, hand over hand, she began the ascent, while Vance stood, grinding his teeth in impotent rage.

Upward she went, without faltering.

"Keep your aim on him; or chance he will play you a trick," Mira said, quite coolly, and the advice, though scarcely needed, was good enough. Never for once did Ward Farrar take his eye or his aim off of the man below him until, in safety, Mira swung herself upon the plateau beside him.

Then, as she sunk down, somewhat unstrung by her late exertion, he coolly began to coil up the rope.

"He will starve there," gasped Mira.

"Scarcely. I will share my provisions with him and they will keep him alive until help comes. He will be found soon enough. Thank Heaven, I was just in time. You are famished. In my haversack there is wine and meat. To work at them, for there is a task before us."

Perfectly unmindful of the man below he completed his task.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GENERAL SLOAT BEGINS TO LOOK AFTER HIS INTERESTS—WHAT GID WALSH HAD DONE.

GENERAL HARVEY SLOAT knew very well where he was going to when he left Blue Tank; and he went very quietly. People might wonder why he did not go with Roger Vanclyde. There were a dozen reasons why he should not, and several very good excuses, but he had no desire to give any of them.

The fact was, he was bound for the camp of the charcoal-burners, in search of information; and he wanted no one about when he held his conference with the chief, or whoever else he might meet there.

Yet it was hardly by chance that when he had found the camp the first person that made his appearance was the little man who rejoiced in the name of Bantam Hayes.

He came forward with a quick step and a brightening face. He knew more, perhaps, than it was expedient that one man should know.

"Good-afternoon," said the general, doubtfully. "Can you tell me where I can find William Bucket?"

"Good P. M.," responded the Bantam. "William with ther bucket hes perobably went up ther flume; but es I hed an insight inter ther game I'm perfectly willing my name should be Elisher."

"Why, what do you mean, my man? I have a good many interests scattered around at large, and I happen to have a moneyed interest in this camp, as well as in the mining affairs around Blue Tank. If I have kept my name dark that is my own concern. Bucket knew. I wanted to see whether to break up or keep on. I saw something of the way things were run last night and I want an explanation. I'm not paying men to hold vigilance courts, and such nonsense. You understand?"

"Oh, yes, I understand," answered Hayes, with a wink. "But if you want to know what work ther boys have been doing, an' how it foots up in dollars an' cents, yer couldn't hev struck a better man ner me; fer I keep ther time, an' run ther books. You'll find it all ship-shape, everything reg'lar to ther penny, an' ther last dollar safe in Major Calligan's hands."

"How?"

"Calligan's. Ef yer keep ther stamps yerself ther agents kim down on yer; if yer deposit in Brown's bank nothin' will yer ever git back, because it's a faro concern, an' what his dealer, Charley Cole, don't know about pasteboards ain't much use; ther loan concern is dead gone bu'sted an' broke all up; an' so Calligan's ther only solid man left in town—when he's thar. So kim inter ther shanty, an' I'll show yer ther books."

As there was no excuse convenient, even if he did not want to see the accounts of the camp, General Sloat followed the little man.

It was pretty certain that Hayes knew something. He was too shrewd a man to open up such a mine of confidence to an unaccredited stranger.

It did not take more than a glance to see

that everything relating to the accounts of the camp was in perfect order, though the books were kept on a system original with Hayes. The sum totals, carried down to the close of the preceding week, showed a clear profit.

"Confound it, man," said Sloat, suddenly turning. "Speak out! If you know anything of Bucket, and his business, and the tragedies that seem lately to have been enacted here, let me know all. It will be money in your pocket, for the past, and quite likely for the future."

"Es much es a hundred down?"

"Yes, when I have it again. Go on."

And so Mr. Hayes began a story, which made General Sloat rather shiver to think what might have been the result if the Bantam had been a less venal man. Without having been taken into their confidence, it was wonderful how he knew so much about his agents.

That the defunct Gideon Walsh, Bucket, and another Gideon, whose last name was Gordon, had been in a game of some kind was very clear; and yet the Bantam serpented around the boundary line of severe fact.

"Walsh kim hyer on ther tramp, but fogged out slick enough, and was a mighty good hand with pistols and cards, so it wasn't long before he got in with all Blue Tank. As fur Bucket, he'd know'd him afore, an' two old pards they was, looking right over me, fur which I didn't care, es I was running my own clam-sloop, an' didn't want to have to toot their horn."

"Where the trouble began was a streak ov biz that Calligan seemed to set up. He posted Walsh and started him off to get some papers that he found out were hidden, down South country, out ov which he reckoned he could make a divy."

"Then Walsh come back, swearing that it was all kibosh an' that they had put up an April-fool on him—but he got those papers, an' don't you furgit it."

"Calligan took it easy, only he winked, an' said: 'It's mighty lucky you didn't find 'em after all, because they belonged to a dangerous man, an' I wouldn't like to meet even his ghost with them in my pocket.'"

"Walsh laughed, an' thought he wouldn't skeer at two or three ghosts; but ther major were in earnest. Ther ghost kim back, er somethin' else; fur Gid Walsh, es good a man es they ginnerally make 'em, hes passed in his chips, an' ther papers are turned up missin'."

"And how does it come that a youngster like him that they were hanging last night could get away with a man like Walsh; and if he got the papers how does it come that they weren't found on him? I suppose he was searched?"

"It was a squar', stand-up, knife fight. Gid said so, an' described ther feller, an' named his handle; but he thort he'd fooled him on ther papers, fur he didn't hev 'em on him, an' he told me whar he'd hid 'em; but ther youngster know'd too, an' got thar fust. They took him right near ther spot; an' es I war ther only one that know'd his game he warn't searched et once. Then he got away, an', they say, turned ther pack over ter a stranger in Blue Tank. An' that's all about that."

The emphasis on "that," gave Sloat to understand there was something more. He made his queries.

"Yes. Thar were a game thet were ter be possibly set up on a girl. A leetle nonsense, 'bout playin' road-agent, an' all thet; but general, it ain't panned out well, fur I'd bet high thet every one in ther game hes gone under—unless it's me an' Gid Gordon."

"Ah, and now I smell the mouse. This Gid Gordon has been giving the game away to you. And so it is all up?"

"If Calligan comes in it is. I wouldn't try ter bluff ag'in' him. But ther way it stands I don't see why I couldn't run things es well es Bill Bucket. Ther mortality ov this hyer camp hes been frightful; but it ain't been among my men. Gimme ther price, an' take me fur a pard. I'll put ther thing on er string. Bucket tried last night, ef I ain't mistook, an' went outen ther wet, I'll gamble. Now's our time. Ther agents won't be lookin'. An' I kin bring out a couple men es desp'rit es any you'll find in Vane's gang."

"But is Vane, the captain, himself dead, and who, in reality, was he?"

"Now yer askin' questions thet beat all conundrums ever invented. I dunno, an' it makes no dif. I kin find ther gal; an' that's your game. Mind yer, I don't count on ary harm happenin' to her; but ef yer want a fair show fur courtin' er reskoo'in' I'll put yer in ther way, fur stamps. Talk quick. Take me, er leave me. It's Bantam Hayes thet's crowin', an' I'm a desp'rit rooster. Es fur Vane—I'm goin' fur him when the time comes."

The little man knew enough to be dangerous; and just now General Sloat was in want of a tool. Could he trust him—would he not have to?

"By the Eternal! I've sworn to carry this thing through, and I'll do it. And yet—"

Up and down the hut walked the general, trying to make up his mind. The wonderful mortality of which Hayes spoke was appalling; but he was reckless enough to disregard it all if he was certain he could trust his man.

"He bites," thought Hayes, and his ferret eyes glistened.

Sloat had indeed decided.

"Come with me. The rest of this talk must be held in the open air, where there can be no chance for listeners."

"All right. I kin lead yer ter just sich a spot—I kin lead yer inter ther camp ov ther agents ef yer say so. Bucket knew ther road, too; but he went once too often."

"To-night will be time enough for that if need be; but the girl will, most likely, be no longer in their power. This Calligan and another went with her uncle to pay her ransom and bring her to Blue Tank. We will probably have to work from there, out. And this camp must not have finished with the man who killed Gid Walsh. There is that score to settle. Oh, there is work to be done, if we only had the men to do it."

"Wait until you see mine," said the Bantam, as he led the way out from the hut. "An' don't be sure about ther gal. I'll bet rocks Calligan don't git her. It ain't ther game."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A MINISTERING ANGEL?

WHEN Bill Bucket's eyes opened feebly, and he glanced around, he could not even conjecture how long he had lain senseless and helpless at the foot of the canyon wall. It was night when Mira pushed him over; it was broad daylight now.

Everything was, for the time, blurred and uncertain; a mist was on his brain, and all he could feel was pain everywhere.

By and by the mist lifted a little. He could count, or try to count, his wounds and bruises; he could remember what had happened; he could even, in a dull way, wonder how he had escaped instant death.

His left arm was swelled, mangled, useless. He had sprained it in the fall, as he caught on a projection; he had shattered the shoulder when he struck the ground. His face was cut and seamed; his body was gashed; his limbs were nerveless.

And yet he was alive.

That fact satisfied him for a little, and then he began to recall in a wandering way, the events of the night before. He thought of his defeat at Blue Tank; of the anger that drove him on to seek his revenge; and then of the fragile girl, whose neck he could have crushed like a pipe-stem, though she had hurled him down to destruction.

At thought of her he tried to grind his teeth in rage; and the involuntary effort gave him such intense pain that he moaned with agony.

At the sound the bushes parted near him, and a woman stepped out into the open; a girl-woman, perfect in figure and face, though her beauty was of the dark, lurid type born of a dash of Indian blood. It was Florencia, the woman of the stage-coach, who had fired the vengeful shots at Colonel Jehu, and who, unable to stand the suspense, and after a brief conference with Old White, the trailer, had slipped out from Blue Tank, in the vague hope of being herself able to discover something of the missing man, the escaped victim of the Vigilantes.

She came and stood looking down in Bucket's countenance. There was a shade of pity in her face—that drifted away like a

cloud before a storm. In the mangled mass she recognized the chief of charcoal camp.

He looked up with terror added to his pain. Womankind, at this stage of his life, was dangerous to him, if not fatal. He feared it was Vera, seeking for her last prisoner.

"Ah," said Florencia, drawing a long slender poniard from its hiding-place at the back of her neck. "Villain, I have found you, at least. The truth, now, or die."

Bucket feebly raised himself a little on his right arm, and gazed at her with an unrecognizing stare, while his white lips fashioned the question:

"What?"

"You are the giant who last night thought by weight and numbers to crush one man. It looks as though you had met him face to face on an equal footing. Just so he would be apt to grind you to pieces. Speak, man; where is he? Is he living and free?"

"Water!"

She saw the word rather than heard it, and—not for mercy's sake—stooped and moistened his lips from a flask.

"More," he said, with a flash of gathered strength, and into his mouth she poured a liberal portion of the burning fluid—whisky, that she had brought with her to be prepared for any emergency.

It revived him wonderfully. He was hard to kill, and his great reserves of strength had been hitherto untouched.

"Ther's a hut nigh hyar. Help me thar, an' I'll tell yer all, ef ye'll sw'ar ter bring one ov ther boys from ther camp. They'll keer fur me then."

"First swear to me that he is living."

"I kin sw'ar ter that, ef yer mean ther pison snake we tried ter scotch et Blue Tank."

Then he took an oath from the sound of which many a woman would have shrunk back frightened, but which Florencia listened to with greedy ears. After that she could not doubt the man, who was so near to death.

"And now, where is he?"

A cunning look came into the pain-dulled eyes.

"Help me first. Then I'll tell ther rest."

The girl had muscles of steel, but Bucket was a mountain. It was no small task before her.

She bent herself to the work. For an hour she toiled on with the man who seemed to strengthen, though once he fainted. She found the hut he spoke of, a deserted, lonely place. Of its use she could not guess. There was a kind of bed in one corner, on which she placed him, and once more she gave him of the stimulant.

"I'll tell yer all yer ask; but I'll keep a secret you'll want to know till yer bring me Banty Hayes, er one ov ther men. I ain't sure yer wouldn't murder me ef I hadn't somethin' back."

There was truth in his chance shot. The kindness of the girl was anything but Samaritan; and an abiding hatred gleamed in her eyes, though she smothered it in her words as she drew him on to tell his knowledge.

And as Gid Gordon had been a witness of the interview between Farrar and Vance, and since had gone with Bucket to meet his fate in the cliff dwellings that served as a lair for the outlaws, the latter could give to Florencia a story of which she had not dreamed.

"You lie!" she exclaimed, hotly, as Bucket told her that whether he had escaped or not Herbert Vance had been saved from the rope by the wife of his boyhood, to whose bosom he was evidently only too anxious to return.

"You lie! Because you sought to kill him you are afraid that I will kill you. Pitiful coward that you are, do you not know that the man who would falsely accuse him would doubly stand a chance to die at my hands? Yet I will not kill you; I will leave you. Lie there, and rot. I raise no finger again for a false-hearted, foul-mouthed wretch like you."

Bucket groaned in chorus. Perhaps he enjoyed the sight of her anger because he knew how much there was of pain behind it; but it was no joke to be abandoned, even if he had a reasonable hope that he would soon be found. He hated, even, to lose her company, though she had bound up his

wounds and done about all for him that she could.

"Hold on, hold on!" he exclaimed, and she halted though she did not hear him.

"It all may be true," she murmured. "No blame to either that we lost one another, yet this girl may come between us. I remember, I remember. I have heard of her. But he will not be false—he *dares* not be."

"Money will do 'most anything, miss," groaned Bucket. "If she was out of the way it would work as well, and maybe suit him better? But he's not the man to throw arms a fortin'. When yer find him her arms'll be 'round him, an' she ain't no slouch on looks. Then kim back an' tell Bill Bucket he war lyin'."

It was an effort to talk; but the chief of the charcoal camp had to have his fling, though he lay white and motionless for it. He could gain nothing; but he might sow seeds that would sprout, and bear a crop of revenge.

"Lying or not, beware! Let him, too, beware. Better for both that he should be in the grave to which I fancied he had been assigned, than that he should be false. I can love; but I can hate, I would have died for him. Let him beware lest he wish that I had."

"Keep an eye on her, an' I'll sw'ar you won't fail ter fetch him."

"True, true! And here I have been wasting time. I will slay her where I find her. He can gather her corpse to his breast, then, if he chooses; or take me, still warm and loving. Quick! Speak."

"Oh, it's not fur to see her; but a tramp that would tire them leetle feet to reach her. Don't leave me. Yer kin watch her from hyar—an' see her starve ter death ef it does yer good. Look away yonder, up ther kenyon side. Ther's a ledge thar, an' I'll bet a hundred she's crouchin' thar yit. That's why I'm lyin' hyar."

She stood near the door as he spoke and turning she gazed at the towering wall at whose base she had found the broken man. Her eyes were keen and clear as a falcon's, and the sun was now shining directly on the ledge. With such a light, in that marvelously clear atmosphere she could see a mile.

At the moment she looked Vance was fastening his rope on the crown of the precipice. As she descried his figure he moved forward and lowered himself over the brink. On the ledge below she could see the crouching form of Mira. In another moment the two would be together.

Florencia gave a great cry. The sight maddened her. She sprung out through the open doorway and bounded back toward the cliff, leaving Bucket raging and alone.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

RECAPTURED.

THE haversack of Ward Farrar was no unwelcome sight to Mira Coyle. She could not live altogether on excitement, and danger had not altogether taken away her appetite. She accepted Farrar's advice; and the man on the ledge below was perfectly willing to accept the chunk of meat that was cast down to him as though he was a dog.

"You have come at last," said Mira, with her mouth so full as almost to prevent her talking.

"I looked for you, longed for you, and waited for you. I began to believe that you had deserted me until I met the villain below. Then I feared he had killed you. Of course I had penetrated your disguise, well made up though it was."

"He did his best; but my good luck seems to be at the flood tide, I do believe that I have learned something of importance from him, though I chanced a pistol ball that touched me if it did not damage."

"And I too have learned something, I believe that yonder man is a sham, though I cannot explain the wonderful resemblance in looks and voice; or tha the knows something of the history of the past. Better that I had taken on trust the story of the death by the hands of the Vigilantes of the man Captain Vane, whom I knew to be Herbert Vance. A thousand times better, for he at

least had the bravery of a lion, bad though he was; while yonder man, who may have lived a life that is honest for this latitude, is slimy as a serpent—is a treacherous, remorseless villain at heart, who on the strength of my childish folly would claim me as his slave for life."

"He would indeed if he dared; but if you and I join forces he dares not. It was for that reason that he tried to kill me—me who saved his life. I would be the last as I was the sole confidant of the secret, which, once known, sets you free."

"And yet to face the scandal of the courts, and the slanders of society, I must have been mad. A divorce I might claim and win; but even then who knows how far his power might go?"

"No courts need you invoke against him, even if it be Herbert Vance. A word from you and me, and he will crawl away, baffled. But before it is spoken think well if there be no lingering love, no traces of the fatal fascination left. You see him at his worst now; at his best he is a wonderful handsome fellow. He is in semi-disguise, and looks more boyish by a dozen years than his years warrant. Beware of the old-time charming."

"Your words are an insult," began Mira, hotly. "I have suffered in silence for fear of the shame; now I will fight as only a woman can fight—even if it sends him to the gallows."

"I believe you now. In the old time he worked upon your fears more than your affections. He made you believe that you were hopelessly compromised, and so won you to agree to a secret marriage. And then he had to flee to avoid the irate brother of another, who was *not* afraid of courts or social ban. True, is it not?"

"Truth itself; yet who are you? How do you know so much? Why have you kept silent so long? I doubt *you*, too. Are you in league with the villain? or what is the secret at which you hint so darkly? Tell it to me; but beware. I am a woman at bay and I will not change masters. There is an air of murder here, and it prompts me to slay you too."

She was up on her feet and flaming with wrath. Since she had become so handy with weapons it was almost an even thing that she did not draw on him there.

Farrar folded his arms and looked into her face with a reproachful smile.

"The secret is this. You were never married to him. The night that you supposed you joined hands with Herbert Vance, he was speeding down the Hudson, a hasty fugitive."

"What?"

"It is the truth. As, *then*, he would not lose you he had a substitute, who muttered his vows for him, kissed you once, and left you at the altar, with a promise to return to you soon."

"And yonder worm below was the substitute, and you—you, Ward Farrar—was the witness. Oh, heavens! The truth is worse than the lie. The real Herbert Vance was hung by the mob; but I am left in the power of his double."

She staggered away from him, and pistol in hand crept toward the verge of the chasm.

"He shall not live," she muttered, in a distracted sort of way. "Better to end it here. Who would live under such a curse?"

Farrar divined her intention, and sprung to her side.

"Hold. For heaven's sake listen. It is not—"

He caught the wrist of the hand that held the pistol. With her other hand she strove to push him away, struggling fiercely.

"One word; listen!"

"No, no; I had trusted you, but I know you now."

He held both of her wrists now, as in a vise, their arms stretching upward. Panting and wild she looked up into his eyes.

Just at that instant Farrar felt something cold upon his wrists, there was a quick snap, and then they were glued together. From behind a pair of handcuffs had been deftly locked on by one brawny man, while another wrenched Mira away from his grasp.

"Take it easy, pard," said a coarse voice. "We war lookin' fur ther gal, not meanin' ter harm her, fur she'd be in a heap more danger wanderin' round these kenyns than

ef she war with us. Ef she hedn't been so spry a-gittin' out an' hidin', I reckon she'd bin in Blue Tank by this time. Now we'll hev ter scoop yer both in till ther lieutenant gits back. Go slow, leetle one. Yer wuth five thousand to us, an' we wouldn't harm yer nohow."

Once more Mira was in the hands of the outlaws; but this time she was not alone. Between them the road-agents marched off two prisoners; and there was no lingering on the spot.

As they went Mira gave one backward glance, and then set her lips firmly together. It might be death to Vance to leave him below upon the ledge; but on the other hand she would not betray him into the hands of the road-agents. Her burst of passion was over; if she was ransomed or escaped she could send aid out to him from Blue Tank.

After the one glance she turned to Farrar.

There was a shade of sadness on his face; but he seemed to have no fear, though it seemed to her that if he was once recognized as the man, who, in the guise of Bart Brandon, had worked such slaughter at the ford, his life would be worth but little.

CHAPTER XXXV.

GENERAL SLOAT PLAYS HIS LAST CARD; AND BILL BUCKET ENDS HIS GAME.

BLUE TANK was a pretty bad place; but even Blue Tank would have "chipped in" to clean out the road-agents when it was found that they had gone outside of the recognized order of business, had not a few of the older heads, receiving their wisdom from Major Calligan, tempered public opinion somewhat. The lynching affair had in some way got mixed up with the outlaws' foray, in the minds of the people, and that had its influence also. No one would say positively that there was not some little game that did not appear on the surface. As those most nearly concerned seemed willing to run affairs themselves Blue Tank subsided.

The coming of the cavalry created another ripple; but the sight was not altogether a new one, and when officers and men proved uncommunicative Blue Tank let them severely alone.

There were eyes on them, however, and a couple of men loitering about who could worm out of a turnip any secret let drop within stone's throw, though they might each be able to conceal his presence from the other.

The town might know nothing of it, but these two men had discovered that little rest would the blue-coated children of Uncle Sam have that night, since they were to move out in search of the desperate gang which had not only robbed a great many travelers, but had also tampered with that sacred thing, the United States mail.

When there was nothing more to be learned the two spies moved off. Though they started in different directions they soon dropped upon parallel lines. One was in hot haste to find Bantam Hayes; the other was in as great a hurry to carry the news to the endangered outlaws.

And Bantam Hayes uttered an unholy wish as he heard the intelligence, for not long before his other confederate, who had been spying at the ruins, had brought the information that Mira had not been transferred to her uncle. On the strength of that a plan of procedure had just been laid out. No wonder Sloat was not rejoiced to hear of the search that was to be made since it seemed likely that it would cause the plans that he had just laid to be abandoned. As much as that he said to his ferret-eyed little tempter.

"Oh, yes, if yer wants ter weaken hyer's ther boys thet will take water. An' if yer hes ther sand ter finish ther job, hyer's ther boys es will kerry their corner ov ther contract. Either way, pay up, kim down, fork over ther rhino."

"But what else is there for us to do?"

The general totally ignored the latter part of the Bantam's address.

"If we go to masquerading now we'll stand treble chances of being shot. Not much difference will they make between us and the Simon pure knights of the canyon, if they find us set up for a target."

"Ther's chances, an' other chances. Ef you chips in an' casts ther gal off afore they git thar, she must be a mighty queer sort ov a female ef she don't weaken to the man thet brung salvation. But ef yer afear'd thet she won't—kerry her off anyhow. Me an' my pard'll do ther work, an' you kin be a prisoner moreover. Eh? While you're waitin' fur us to 'range financi'l matters you kin be doin' yer courtin'. Ef they roust us out we'll guarantee to skip an' take keer ov our hides, an' what kin they say about you? That ef ther gal don't hev yer she orter."

"And do you think you are a better man than Gid Walsh? He failed."

"I should smile. An' twice as cheap. Say, quick. I've got another lay ef you don't nibble."

"So be it. I risk thousands, I risk my neck; but it is worth it to win. The scheme goes on. We can try; and if we do not succeed what worse off are we? And, against these outlaws of the canyons I am not afraid to act. Give me an equal chance and place me face to face with their captain himself, if he be living, and I ask no more."

"Thet's right. Quick on ther trigger is what does ther biz."

"And so the matter goes on?"

"You bet. It's time ter draw in ther other fellers, so yer kin see who's the crowd, an' arrange about ther pewter. I don't say sure we'll win; but you'll know ther size on ther nerve afore morning."

Scant form of oath was there between the four men that crossed hands in the darkness, since time began to be precious. A few words only passed, and then, mounting, the party rode hastily away, with Bantam Hayes at the head. He intended to succeed where Bill Bucket had failed; and in intimate knowledge of the canyons and their denizens Hayes was, perhaps, the better man.

"A good twenty-mile ride will we hev ter-night, gen'r'l, ef we win."

"And if we fail?"

Hayes glanced downward.

"We'll go ter brimstone afoot."

After that but little was said. They kept steadily and silently on, by devious paths. Not once was their little leader at fault.

At last he called a halt.

"Strategy's ther word. It's wuth more ner a dozen pistols. We'll leave ther mustangs hyer, an' Tom ter watch 'em."

On foot the three proceeded, toiling upward. By and by they stood on the edge of the precipice, just above the ledge on which, not long before, Mira had been crouching.

"Over yonder," said Hayes, pointing with his finger, "is whar they hang out. Ef I was to holler hyer they'd hear me shout. This hyer is ther back door. It's a tickelish way ter git in; but it's been tried afore. Ef yer lack nerve yer hadn't ought ter started on sich a frolic."

He stooped now, and, seemed to be searching for a particular spot. He found it after a little, and then, thrusting the heavy iron picket pin he had into a socket that had long ago been drilled in the rock, he passed an end of the stout pair of lariats he unslung from his shoulder through the ring, and knotted the two ends together.

"No slippin' in that, an' when we git down we'll ontie, an' pull our bridge after us."

"But how will we get back?"

Somewhat nervously spoke the general. The outlook might well appall the coolest head.

"We don't kim back. We drop, an' go down. From the ledge we're aimin' at there's half a dozen steps. I'll take yer through O. K. Hyer's ter show yer way. Foller yer leader."

Nimble as a sailor or a monkey Bantam Hayes clutched the rope and lowered himself out of sight. Soon his voice was heard, guardedly calling to them from the ledge below. One after the other the two men joined him. Untying the knot the Bantam brought the rope down from the pin above.

"Now kims ther tryin' part ov muscle an' nerve. I've never been through hyer but once, but I reckon I kin steer yer clear ov trouble; an' ef I do I'll take yer right inter ther heart ov ther castle. Mighty onhandy these doors be; but when they're shut they stay ter keep. I've gi'n 'em a good look once, an' sing'lar es it seems, they kin only be opened from ther outside. It's ther weak

p'int thet if yer want ter kim back yer must leave ther way open behind yer. This yere whole kenyon is seamed up with sich curious old holes. Ef a feller knowed 'em all he could dodge in 'em furever. Now, pard, ketch hold."

He advanced to the rock which Bill Bucket had put in place, and which Mira's feeble little hands had been unable to move. His partner, a low-browed, silent man, with the look of a desperado and the muscles of an athlete, stooped to assist him.

Between them the rock was forced back, revealing the low, square aperture.

"I'll go ahead; you-uns kin foller on ther crawl."

Into the opening went Hayes; behind him came the other two. After a little the passage grew larger; they went on more at their ease.

Then they came to a narrower point, and again Hayes took the lead.

"Stiddy by jerks, now; an' walk es though on eggs; we're reachin' a p'int thet ther danger begins. Wait a minnit till I clear ther way."

From the moment that they had entered the passage, all around them had been thick darkness. General Sloat had nerves of steel, but it was beginning to tell on them. He stood thrilling with a restless inquietude, an apprehension of something ghastly, he knew not what.

He heard the voice of the Bantam calling:

"Kim hyer, Sam, an' bear a hand. Ther durned thing won't work. She's wedged tighter ner bricks."

Sam went forward; the two tugged and pushed. Then there was a glimmer of light as Hayes lit a candle that he had brought with him.

"Dished, by ther livin' hokey! I'll bet ther Comstock to an old oyster-can thet Bill Bucket hes bin hyer. He's left ther wall smooth es yer hand, curse him!"

He came back from the low narrow opening, creeping on all-fours, but still bearing the lighted candle.

"This game is U. P., but I know another one. There's a good many ways to the woods. Take the back track now, an' be quick about it. It ain't sich a long time till mornin'."

He passed them, again leading the way, evidently in haste; and the two followed. To Sloat any escape from what seemed to be a living tomb, would be grateful.

A wild cry from the Bantam struck on his heart like a knife. What was it? He pushed forward, moving his way into the slender burrow on his hands and knees.

"Trapped, by h—!"

The smothered voice of Hayes sounded wan and ghastly. In front of him was the wall of solid rock, fitting tightly in against a shoulder. Though he beat against it, and Sam added his enormous strength to push it outward, there was not so much as a tremor.

The three men were buried alive.

Scarcely had the three men left the ledge, to thread the secret passage when, from the outermost niches a dark figure unwound itself and moved forward. It was Vance, who had all the time been crouching as motionless and dark as the rock against which he leaned.

"Lucky for me that I kept my mouth shut. I've learned a wrinkle or two, and found a way out of an infernal bad mix. They would have tumbled me over the ledge without the shadow of a wink. Yes, here's the rope. Good-by, ledge, for the most devilish prison ever invented. I'll bother no more about the girl till I have the other things in shape. I can't afford to lose them. Here goes for Blue Tank!"

He placed Bucket's bar, which he had long ago found, in position, gave the rope a turn around it, knotting the ends, and was about to begin his descent, when an idea came into his head.

"Come now! It's possible there may be a fire in the rear. They'd soon as not drop rocks on my head, and make an awful squash. Let's see if we can't provide against that."

He looked at the rock, tried it, and found that it moved easily, as though on wheels. He could see the shoulders that required a

dead lift to draw it out. He took away a stone wedge that Hayes had inserted to provide beyond a doubt against accident, and then applied his shoulder. The stone trembled, moved, glided to its place, and was shut forever.

Vance applied a few wedges, to make assurance doubly sure, and then turned away. He did not really know what he had done, but he had a vague suspicion. As he dropped from the ledge, sliding along the rope, he chuckled grimly.

The Bantam had explained the way thoroughly, and he had little fear of the result. There was a series of ledges that, one after another, could be reached by the rope. On each one he rested a few moments, and finally swung himself over the last one. Now it did not seem so far from the ground in the bed of the canyon.

Safely he made the journey. His hands unclasped from the rope. He stood at last safe, though breathless, at the foot of the mighty wall.

And then from the darkness at his feet there arose a terrible roar, like the voice of a wounded lion, and the gigantic figure of Bucket, the boss of charcoal camp, rose and towered over him, the one unmangled hand settling on his throat in a gripe that flesh and blood could not resist. Deserted in the hut, he had crawled back hither in a fury of madness.

"I've got yer, hev I? Ah-h-h! Hyar's my last job; but I'll do it well. I swore I'd kill yer, an' I'll keep my word."

The talons sunk deeper, there was a crouching and a tearing, as when a tiger rends his prey.

Then the two dropped side by side, and were still.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MAJOR CALLIGAN SHOWS HOW THINGS OUGHT TO BE DONE.

For what seemed an age Mira waited in the same chamber from which, twenty hours or more before, the boss of charcoal camp, had carried her. As for Ward Farrar she saw nothing of him from the time when, entering by the face of the opposite canyon, they were separated.

No secret outlet for escape was there now, however, since that had been carefully walled up; and what might be before her she could not guess. The retreat seemed vacant; and her two captors only grimly nodded to her questions, and answered:

"Wait till ther captain comes."

When that would be they did not deign to inform her.

Nevertheless the hours dragged on safely, if slowly, and her fears were not altogether unmixed with hope.

Without, and below, two women stood, looking upward, as if trying to pierce the gloom in which, above, a thread-like path was shrouded.

By a strange chance Florencia, baffled in her first attempts to scale the canyon, and going to the right instead of the left, found at last a draggled, frightened, hysterical woman, who scarce could tell her that her name was Mrs. Ward, and that she had escaped, the night before, from the outlaws.

Florencia, if she had had the game in sight might have gone on and left her; but darkness was upon her, and all around was silence. Any company was better than none at all. Besides, after a little, there might be something learned from Mrs. Ward; and there might be danger in leaving her behind. She caught her hand and wandered on in her search until, by chance, they found this path, just when Mrs. Ward was protesting she could not go a step further.

And, then, they heard a step just behind them, and turning they were confronted by a man, whose face they could not see in the darkness, and who might have risen from the ground, so suddenly did he come.

"Good-evening, my dears," said this newcomer jauntily. "An' a foine toime it is to be afther takin' a walk. It's a sthroll Oi'm havin' meself, an' moighty lonely it wur till I dropped to ther soight av yez. Will it be afther compinny yez lookin'?"

He tipped his hat and stood waiting respectfully for an answer.

"Stand off, sir," replied Florencia, fiercely. "Do you see this? I pull trigger if you offer insult. Who are you, sir?"

"Sure it's Major Michael Calligan, sometimes called the count, that Oi am; an' it's the badd mon ov Blue Tank that itthers name me. Sorra a wan av me would tr'ate an on-protected faymale with disryspict, fur it's the last drap av me bludd would Oi shpill in definse av the sex. Thry me, an' if it's in thrubble or sorrow that you are it's mesilf that's ther broth av a boy thet will help yez out. Frazzle onto me, fur it's a scr'amer on whales ye'll foind me. It's wan av ther ginder Oi'm sakin' now—a Miss Moira Coyle, captured by the road-agints. By no chance could that same be ayther av yez?"

At the sound of Mira's name Mrs. Ward clapped her hands and fairly shouted.

"Oh, you brave man! Have you come out to search for her alone? I am her companion, lost with her, and last night I made my escape. I have been wandering ever since, and am almost starved. Help us quickly. Guide us to the city quickly and then come back with an army to save poor, lost Mira."

"Sorra bit av an army does it nade, since Oi'm here mesilf. Ten er twinty av the b'yes would hardly make a mouthful. But phat wor yez afther here?"

He looked from Mrs. Ward to her companion just in time. As she attempted to bound away he sprung forward and caught her by the wrists.

"Let me go, you Irish braggart, I will find them. Yonder path leads to their lair, and I will reach it if I die."

"Av ther agints wor there most loikely you would, but it's mesilf thinks they've ske-daddled. An' it's no braggart that Oi am. Av yez choose to risk it it's Michael Calligan that will go wid yez. Oi have the oir'ns at me belt that will talk fur both av us."

"In the fiend's name, then, come."

He released his gripe and sprung up the path, with the girl at his heels; while Mrs. Ward, with a dismal howl at their desertion, seated herself in despair.

"Halt!"

They had won their way upward to a little plateau on which the shadows lay darkly, for the overhanging rocks shut out the moonbeams. At the same time they heard the strong click of the spring of a carbine as the hammer was pushed back while a suddenly opened lantern cast full upon them a glare of light.

Florencia carried in her hand her revolver, and at the command the major tore out his own weapons; but of what use were they since no one could they see.

"Put up yer sixes," continued the voice, "an' hold yer hands up. We hev yer lined an' yer can't git out. Our prisoners you are, an' don't you furgit it. Who are you, an' what does yer want?"

It was bad generalship on the part of the major to allow himself to be taken in such a trap; but once there little blame to him if he could not see how to fight his way out.

"Oi surrinder at diserition!" he exclaimed, returning his pistols to their belt and holding up his hands. "Tr'ate me aizy, an' ef yez can't be aizy be ez aizy ez ye kin."

"And as for me," said Florencia, stepping a pace or two forward, "I am here to have an interview with your captain. Lead me to him and I ask no more."

From somewhere behind the lantern came a chuckle.

"All correct, little calico; but first we must settle with this rooster. Step up; Major Calligan, an' don't growl at the rack if the fodder is dry. You're a good little man but you traveled too fur on yer pluck, an' you've got to come down."

Down it is, but handle me tinderly an' tich me wid care. Me toime will come yit."

"No threats," said the invisible outlaw, and the major advanced with his hands high over his head, passed beyond the lantern, and disappeared. There was a momentary silence and then the sentinel spoke again.

"Now step forward, miss. Captain Vane is not here now but will be soon, and he'll see you then sure enough."

Without hesitation she went, and before she saw a living form a rope was knotted around her wrists and she was rendered helpless for harm. Then she, too, was led away.

Jack O'Brady was sitting disconsolately in a niche that was gloomy as a prison cell, and indeed very much resembled one. He had serious doubts about his ultimate fate; and was by no means easy about what might happen to him if he was turned loose. His pockets had been thoroughly emptied and a thousand times he cursed the folly that had led him to meddle with the property in the stage-coach. He was in a shiver of apprehension as he heard footsteps.

"How are yez, me b'ye?"

Looking up at the salutation he saw Major Calligan, with a rope around his wrists and his ankles tied with a knotted cord. He had been seated against the wall by a couple of outlaws, who, having placed him there departed as silently as they had come, leaving a light burning on the floor.

"Musha, glory to the saints; but it's a pardner I have in me disthress, an' a man from the owld sod, at that. Bad scan to ther thaves, an' how did they scoop yer in?"

"An' it's O'Brady that asks that quistion. Sure it wor ter resky ther illigant young lady Oi'm here, an' I lit ther murderin' blaggards take me so az I could foind me way into ther intarior uv ther sacret precincts. I've heard av yez, an' it's a power av thrubble the'r all in about yez; but we're ther bully b'yes ez will show thim ther Spanish shtip from Limerick. Tare an' ouns, Johnny, whin we git loose from here it's takin' these agints all apart we'll be afther."

"Whin we git loose? Sure ye blowin' gossoon it's heels an' crop they've got yez toied, an' a chain they've locked about me middle. Whin we git loose it will be ther rats that will carry us away. An' be ther same token they'll pave our bones. Bad luck to ther day I druv this thrip!"

"Brace up, me b'ye. Don't Oi till yez I'm ther badd mon av Blue Tank, an' don't yez furgit it. Fifty-sivin is me record, an' no Injins counted. Whist, now! Oi've got a knife in me neck an' two revolvers in me boots. Whin the toime comes Oi'll slaughter ther ranch."

"Ye'd better lift yer wickidness at Blue Tank thin; for sorra bit o' good kin yez do here, barrin' kapin' me awake."

"Arrah, now, it's dispondint yez are, wid Calligan here? Wirra, wirra, but thrubble hez onsettled yer brain. Watch me now, Oi'm comin' fur yez."

And the major showed that he knew a thing or two, for he dumped himself over on the floor, and rolling over and over, landed himself at O'Brady's feet.

"Now fale av me neck an' cut the ropes loose. It's a thrick er two we'll show them yit. An' thin it's loose that you'll be too."

O'Brady was doubtful no longer. He found the knife and passed it through the ropes. In a moment the major was free and on his feet. In another moment the lock clicked and flew open; the chain dropped; O'Brady also was clear of his bonds.

"Now give me an oirn an' it's bate Donnybrook we will wid ther shindy we'll raise."

"No shindy will we raise, fur be ther same token it's shstrategy wins. There's lashins av throops comin' this blissid minit an' it's thim kin take ther hard knocks. It's mesilf will show yez ther way, an' yez kin run fur Blue Tank, an' if ye mate ther sodgers goide thim here. An' don't yez forgit to till thim Major Calligan is here; so they won't shoot too reckless loike whin they say me marchin' out wid ther girul. Now folly me."

"Illigant, illigant!" exclaimed the stage-driver. "But, major dear, are you sure ye knows ther way?"

"Av course. I kin put yez out be ther back doour, so ter spake, an' yez kin come back ther same way; but fur yer loife make no noise now."

Either the major was a close observer, or he was very fortunate.

As the outlaws had trusted to the ropes and chain there was no trouble in making off from the spot; but it required knowledge and skill to evade the sentinels.

Yet, as he had said, Calligan sent his man out by a back door, and with a hand-shake dismissed him.

"Now for the girl," the major muttered, as he turned; and after all there was a troubled look in his eye as he glanced up and down the terrace.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PHANTOMS VANISH AND THE END DRAWS NIGH.

MIRA COYLE heard the sounds of approaching footsteps, and was in an agony of expectation. She hoped to see Lieutenant Vera, in whom she had some confidence, and to hear from her that her ransom had been paid and that she might go free.

Instead of Vera came Florencia. She entered sullenly, and the guard retired. At some little distance they could hear the footsteps of a sentinel.

"Sorry am I for your plight," said Mira, "but glad am I of your company; if you are, like me a prisoner. Take courage, though. These men seem like automata, obeying the will of their officers, who, in turn, do not seem altogether demons."

As she spoke she glided toward Florencia, to loosen the cords that still bound her wrists; but the girl shrunk away.

"No, no! Do not touch me! No favor will I take at your hands. If I had my will I would rather slay you, thief that you are."

"Thief? You are mistaken. No part nor lot have I with these outlaws. I am a captive, awaiting ransom."

"Yes, a willing captive. Play innocent, if you choose; but it will not save you."

"You certainly are strangely mistaken. No harm have I done you; and if I could would be but too glad to aid you."

"Oh, you need not deny it, white-faced coward that you are. You came here to seek Herbert Vance. Say no, if you can. You have found him again, and you think you can fool me with your smooth face and lying lips."

"It is false. Herbert Vance is dead. He died a year ago; yet what was he to you?"

"He was my husband, as he had been yours. And it is a lie that he died a year ago. You have held him in your arms within the week—deny that if you dare."

"I do deny it—in part," answered Mira, wonderfully moved. "Yes, it was my misfortune that some mummery, years ago, gave him the bare title of husband; but great relief was it to hear that he was dead, though I did not, no, I did not altogether hate him. And he did die. Not Herbert Vance was it that I snatched from the rope, but a villainous double, a brother, whose sins, honest though he calls himself, are doubtless a thousand times greater than those of the man whom mob law reached. Believe me or not, as you choose. That man lives. I left him on the ledge where he tried to murder me. If you want him doubt not but that you can find him. I would be willing to make myself a beggar if I had never seen him or his brother."

Even the jealous blindness of Florencia was not proof against the truth in Mira's face and that sounded in her tones. The angry light died away from her eyes; sadness stole over her face.

"I would believe you if I dared, since I too thought that Varley Vance died at Ariavaca. They robbed me of his body then, and of his papers that should have been mine—for I tell you he did love me then. I rose from a sick bed, and going, found others had been at Ariavaca. Their trail pointed hither. I came here to search for them, since they robbed me of great wealth. All has gone wrong. The impostor threw me off the track, and now he has the proof that I was Varley's wife. If he is a sham let him beware how he meets me. And you—you would rob me of my rights."

While they spoke Ward Farrar came gliding into the room.

"Quick, quick," he said. "The time for escape is at hand. By a miracle I am free. No doubt there will be wild work here soon. A friend, or scout, or spy, penetrated to my prison, and he tells me that troops are coming, and will attempt a surprise. O'Brady has escaped, and will meet them, to show them the way in."

Mira heard, but shrunk away.

"It may well be so—and that in that wild work one of us two may die. In view of that I command you! You told me part of the truth; if there is more reveal it."

He hesitated.

"Are you a coward, then? I could not have believed it. It is terrible, terrible. And yet I might have guessed it. You were

the unknown witness to that fraud. Such a man could be anything."

"Hold. I was not the witness."

"False! You were!"

"No. I was the fraud himself. I personated the missing man. My lips said the vows, my hand joined yours. No one of the Vances has part or parcel in you. You are the wife from whom I told you I had fled. Sloat knew the story for he was once Vance's partner though he did not at first remember me."

Mira listened with breathless eagerness. To the end she heard him, and then, with a low cry that might mean joy or horror, she crouched upon the side of the couch, and hid her face with her hands.

Down by her side dropped Farrar, and his arm was round her waist as he whispered:

"I was but a foolish boy then, and it was the sin of my lifetime; but I loved you then and I love you now. In heaven's name let me save you if I can."

She raised her face, and on it was an unfathomable look; but her anger was gone.

"If you can. Well, save this woman also. She too is one of his victims."

"Not his victim; but his loving wife; if he lives; his avenger yet if he is dead."

The cords were off of her wrists now, and she stood tiger-like in her beauty and her fierceness. Fit mate was she for a king of road-agents, true relict of a victim of the Vigilantes.

"Let us escape first," interposed Mira. "He whom you seek is not here."

They stood together, looking dubiously around. There was something unnatural in the silence. They began to suspect some scheme or wile.

Major Calligan, gliding silently along what seemed a gallery cut through the solid rock, suddenly halted, and stood with outstretched hands, either forefinger touching the trigger of a cocked revolver. In front of him stood Colonel Jehu with his pistols sameways poised, while at his shoulder stood Vera. A lantern hanging on the wall cast an indistinct light on the scene.

The movement on the part of either man was instinctive, yet might have led to slaughter had not Vera, with a sudden spring, dashed between the two.

"Hands down! You two shall be friends or kill me; and the man that misses me dies by my hand."

"Down they are," said Calligan, coolly. "So you've found him at last, in the shape of the colonel of the Foreign Contingent. Shure, me b'ye, it's me own regiment, and it's yerself that's me inferior officer. Didn't I say yez through ther rifle at Blue Tank az an' ould comrid in arrums? Shake, me b'ye, an' j'ine me ter cl'ane out ther divvils av road-agints."

The major advanced with the usual impudent smile on his face, and his hand extended; but in his speech there had been a transition of tone too wonderful not to be noticed. The colonel looked from Vera to the major and back again in amazement; and though he thrust away his pistols he did not raise his hand.

"To thunder with your Foreign Contingent! I never saw it, and neither did you. Man alive, I don't know you."

"But I know you," responded the major, unblinkingly. "You were once chief of the Skulls; and you're just beginning to think if the road-agents are cleaned up what heap will we three go to. The bone heap, eh? Shtrategy me b'ye. But hould yer whist. Things are workin' too fast."

He was a little too late with his warning. As Vera laughed gayly at the explanation, a woman's voice exclaimed:

"Herbert Vance!"

"Herbert Vance is did, my darlint; he was hung at Ariavaca; an' Varley Vane has voyaged the flume; but here is Major Michael Calligan, very much at yer sarvice."

Florencia halted.

"What is this mystery? I heard his voice—I would know it in my grave. And I know his voice. He is the man from whom I took Herbert's papers, and whom I would have slain; but he is also the man who shot from my hand my revolver when I would have wildly avenged the murder at Ariavaca."

"And a very good thing he did it," said

Calligan, but once more with the voice of Herbert Vance. "I knew you down in the canyon but I tested my disguise and fooled that Mrs. Ward, whom O'Brady has taken with him, and who is doubtless now blowing my horn at Blue Tank."

"And what does this all mean?" said the colonel.

The answer could not come at once, since the arms of Florencia were around the neck of the mock-major, who waited to stop her mouth with a careless kiss. Then, holding her tightly, he responded:

"It means that the Knights of the Canyon have disbanded. I shared the treasury out and they evacuated the castle half an hour ago. If Uncle Sam's doughboys can catch the mountain-goats or the fleeing antelopes they may have some chance of overtaking. As fur Major Mickey Calligan, he'll take his wife, go back to Blue Tank, an' rin the town."

There was for a moment the silence of amazement. Then Colonel Jehu's voice broke in.

"And what is to become of us?"

The colonel twisted his arm around the waist of Vera as he spoke, and his tone was one of query, and not of fear.

"Sure an av yez can't take keer av yerselves it's little good ther Calligans kin do yez. I reckon afore mornin' ye'll be half way to New Mixico, where they've niver heard av Captain Scull, an' Vera will pass fur an angel. Good-by pards; an' if yez iver nade ther rocks draw on me, Mickey Calligan, ther chief ov Blue Tank."

"Farewell then. If there's to be no fighting it is time to go."

The hands of all joined.

"A minute," said Vera, turning to Florencia. "If you should ever see Mira Coyle, late our prisoner here, give her this."

In the outstretched hand she placed the certificate intrusted to her by Colonel Johnson. Then the four parted. A few minutes later at a rattling gallop Lieutenant Vera was leading the way through a devious path half a mile away, while the troops with Roger Vanclyde for moral support and Dave White for guide, were creeping toward the vacant cliffs.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

KNITTING UP THE FRAYED EDGES.

It was by chance that Florencia, following Ward Farrar and Mira, had seen the opening that led into the gallery where she found her husband. She had turned into it to escape her companions. When Colonel Johnson and the girl lieutenant had left them the two hastily arranged their plans.

"Do not be foolish, Florencia. We were too near in the olden time for you to doubt me now. When I first embarked in the Blue Tank speculation, as Major Calligan, I supposed it would be but a temporary frolic, in which I could gain information and perhaps procure safety. I have prospered wonderfully, however, and practically run the town. I have wonderful interests around it and I lose a fortune larger than the whole half dozen I have been forced to abandon if I forsake them, or close them out. I will take you back as a rescued prisoner; and proceed with my courting with true Irish dash. In a fortnight you will be Mrs. Calligan. It's all a risk; but there are only two serious chances against us."

"And those?"

"Cutler Davidge, and a detective in charcoal camp, that goes by the name of Bantam Hayes. The others that I might have feared are dead or dying. This General Sloat would be dangerous too if we did throw him a sprat. You shall place those letters of credit, and the rest, in his hand. They belonged to his old partner, whom he was willing to kill if he was not dead already and marry his widow to get at in her name the fortune he dares not claim in his own. Well, they make him sole owner of the Black Jack, and all that, and he will waltz off and take possession. Then he will linger around that girl, and Farrar will shoot him, and that will end him."

"But the others."

"Oh, well. Hayes is a detective but he's on the make and he suspects it was I killed

Gid Walsh though Egbert got the papers. Not hard will it be to lay a trap for such a man. And Cutler Davidge, who seems to have been your financial backer, is dying with consumption. If there's any hurry I can promise you he won't stay long when Yankee Jim sets eyes on him. He killed Jim's brother and the Yankee knows it. Now it is time to hunt the others. On purpose I sent them into a *cul-de-sac*."

No road-agents did the troops find that night, though suddenly into their midst, as they cautiously felt their way, came Calligan, Farrar and the two girls.

In a moment Mira was in her uncle's arms, and every one was wildly excited. O'Brady and Mrs. Ward had had a wonderful history to relate of the bravery of the major; and he had to tell his story a dozen times in fifteen minutes. He cut it shorter every time.

"Sorra wan av ther agints will yez foind; but be ther same token I kin guide yez through ther retrate. Whin they heard ther brave sodjers wor comin' it was off they wor afther bein'. They tuk me pris'ner, but it's little Calligan cared fur that, wid me knife at me neck an' oir'ns in me boots. O'Brady—an' the same is a brick—an' meself bruck loose, an' Oi sint him on to guide yez in, an' stayed to see no harrum kim to ther girrul. Oi found anither spalpeen trussed up, an' sot him loose, kiverin' his retrate, while Oi howled around; but divil an agint wor lift, an' Oi reckon they've tuk in ther fat man out av ther wet. Did O'Brady git through?"

It was exactly as "the count" declared. With his sharp eyes to ferret out the way no trouble was it to make an entrance into the old cliff dwellings that had been the headquarters of the Knights of the Canyons; but the birds had flown. Some spoil was there, of such a nature as could not be easily transported, but not a dollar in coin. The band had moved their treasury, and changed their quarters. Though old Dave White, the prince of trailers, looked long and eagerly, he found no trail that he could follow; and henceforth all that was known of the Knights was that they had been, but were not.

The men of Blue Tank troubled themselves but little with the mysteries of that night's work. Several men were missing and charcoal camp as well as the road-agent band was broken up. What cared they? They went on making money, and Major Calligan continued "chief" of the town. His reputation was so enhanced that he did not have to shoot a man for a year; and his wealth increased enormously.

All the better, since he had a handsome wife to spend it for. When they departed for a trip abroad—to visit the "jim av the say"—the good wishes of the population went with them; and if they heard of them again it was under another and an unrecognized name.

The disappearance of General Sloat gave some trouble in financial circles and remained unexplained, though it was credited to the Knights of the Canyon, on whose shoulders was also shifted the loss of the mythical Colonel Jehu of the Foreign Contingent, whom nobody wanted, and the death of Bill Bucket and the false Herbert Vance—his right name was Egbert—who were found locked in each other's arms at the foot of a canyon wall into which the soldiers penetrated.

Before the Congressional Committee took its departure there was one stroke of business which does not appear on their records.

The Honorable Beniah coming out of the Palace saw Jack O'Brady sitting on the tongue of his coach, evidently in deep thought.

"What is it, Jack?" asked Holden, struck with the perplexity on his face.

"Bedad, an' mixt it is ontirely, wid these road-agints, an' ther loike; but I don't bel'ave he's an Oirishman at all."

"Ah, you don't. Well, maybe you are right, but don't you breathe a word about your opinion, for Irish or not he shoots very straight, and is the king of this camp."

O'Brady expressed his intention of maintaining inviolable secrecy, and the Honorable Beniah went on. Perhaps it was not by chance that he held an interview with Calligan an hour later.

"From what part of Ireland might you be?" he asked.

"From Limerick."

"Ah, so you might be, so you might be," continued Holden, reflectively. "I am from there myself; don't you detect the brogue? I came over with a man by the name of Vance or Vance, who subsequently went to the bad. But what I was going to say was, we lost some thousand dollars by the blunder of O'Brady when he removed our effects from the stage. You appear to have had the advantage of sacking the agents' camp; wouldn't it be in order to propose a divvy?"

For a moment the Honorable Beniah was in danger, for the bad man saw that his disguise was suspected if not detected—and he remembered that he had seen Holden years before.

"Is that a shquare priposition, hands on ther board, an' honor among thaves?"

"To the amount of ten thousand and our notes."

"Thin, be gobs, I'll say yez in the morn'ing."

Roger Vanclyde had been somewhat surprised when he learned that Farrar had followed them in the guise of Bart Brandon, who, by a liberal *douceur*, had been induced to turn back; but as he would be of inestimable benefit in the making-up of the report there was no trouble made about the young secretary retaking the place from which he had had a brief vacation.

That report was a curiosity. Unfortunately it has never seen the light, and on his return Mr. Vanclyde found that an interloper had secured the Congressional nomination in his district—which was equivalent to an election. So far as appears on the surface, therefore, the only result from his western trip was that Ward Farrar became his nephew.

Let us hope the young couple were happy.

THE END.

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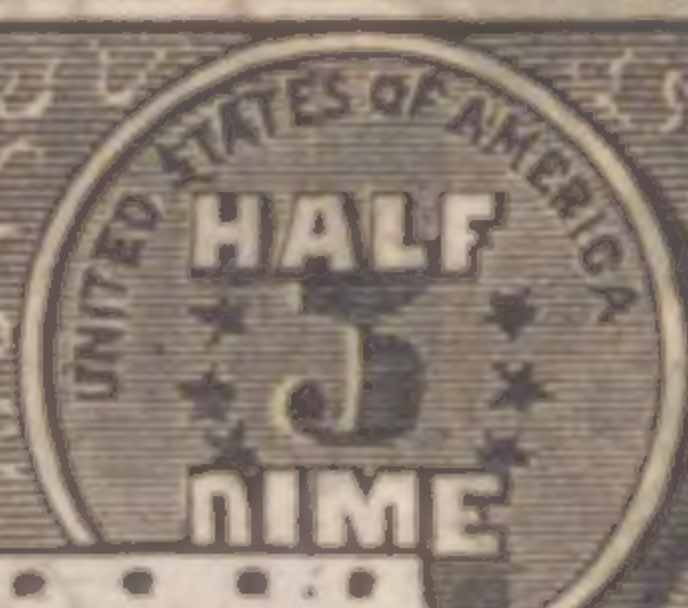
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